

Catelyn Stark shared all their doubts, but she had only to glance at Ser Stevron to see that he was not pleased by what he was hearing. A few more words and the chance would be lost. She had to act, and quickly. "I will go," she said loudly.

"You, my lady?" The Greatjon furrowed his brow.

"Mother, are you certain?" Clearly, Robb was not.

"Never more," Catelyn lied glibly. "Lord Walder is my father's bannerman. I have known him since I was a girl. He would never offer me any harm." Unless he saw some profit in it, she added silently, but some truths did not bear saying, and some lies were necessary.

"I am certain my lord father would be pleased to speak to the Lady Catelyn," Ser Stevron said. "To vouchsafe for our good intentions, my brother Ser Perwyn will remain here until she is safely returned to you..."

"He shall be our honored guest," said Robb. Ser Perwyn, the youngest of the four Freys in the party, dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a brother. "I require my lady mother's return by evenfall, Ser Stevron," Robb went on. "It is not my intent to linger here long."

Ser Stevron Frey gave a polite nod. "As you say, my lord." Catelyn spurred her horse forward and did not look back. Lord Walder's sons and envoys fell in around her.

Her father had once said of Walder Frey that he was the only lord in the Seven Kingdoms who could field an army out of his breeches. When the Lord of the Crossing welcomed Catelyn in the great hall of the east castle, surrounded by twenty living sons (minus Ser Perwyn, who would have made twenty-one), thirty-six grandsons, nineteen great-grandsons, and numerous daughters, granddaughters, bastards, and grandbastards, she understood just what he had meant.

Lord Walder was ninety, a wizened pink weasel with a bald spotted head, too gouty to stand unassisted. His newest wife, a pale frail girl of sixteen years, walked beside his litter when they carried him in. She was the eighth Lady Frey.

"It is a great pleasure to see you again after so many years, my lord," Catelyn said.

The old man squinted at her suspiciously. "Is it? I doubt that. Spare me your sweet words, Lady Catelyn, I am too old. Why are you here? Is your boy too proud to come before me himself? What am I to do with you?"

Catelyn had been a girl the last time she had visited the Twins, but even then Lord Walder had been irascible, sharp of tongue, and blunt of manner. Age had made him worse than ever, it would seem. She would need to choose her words with care, and do her best to take no offense from his.

"Father," Ser Stevron said reproachfully, "you forget yourself. Lady Stark is here at your invitation."

"Did I ask you? You are not Lord Frey yet, not until I die. Do I look dead? I'll hear no instructions from you."

"This is no way to speak in front of our noble guest, Father," one of his younger sons said.

"Now my bastards presume to teach me courtesy," Lord Walder complained. "I'll speak any way I like, damn you. I've had three kings to guest in my life, and queens as well, do you think I require lessons from the likes of you, Ryger? Your mother was milking goats the first time I gave