

"I can't," she wept. "Gods forgive me, Robb, I can't, what if he dies while I'm asleep, what if he dies, what if he dies..." The wolves were still howling. She screamed and held her ears again. "Oh, gods, close the window!"

"If you swear to me you'll sleep." Robb went to the window, but as he reached for the shutters another sound was added to the mournful howling of the direwolves. "Dogs," he said, listening. "All the dogs are barking. They've never done that before..." Catelyst heard his breath catch in his throat. When she looked up, his face was pale in the lamplight. "Fire," he whispered.

Fire, she thought, and then, Bran! "Help me," she said urgently, sitting up. "Help me with Bran."

Robb did not seem to hear her. "The library tower's on fire," he said.

Catelyst could see the flickering reddish light through the open window now. She sagged with relief. Bran was safe. The library was across the bailey, there was no way the fire would reach them here. "Thank the gods," she whispered.

Robb looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "Mother, stay here. I'll come back as soon as the fire's out." He ran then. She heard him shout to the guards outside the room, heard them descending together in a wild rush, taking the stairs two and three at a time.

Outside, there were shouts of "Fire!" in the yard, screams, running footsteps, the whinny of frightened horses, and the frantic barking of the castle dogs. The howling was gone, she realized as she listened to the cacophony. The direwolves had fallen silent.

Catelyst said a silent prayer of thanks to the seven faces of god as she went to the window. Across the bailey, long tongues of flame shot from the windows of the library. She watched the smoke rise into the sky and thought sadly of all the books the Starks had gathered over the centuries. Then she closed the shutters.

When she turned away from the window, the man was in the room with her.

"You weren't s'posed to be here," he muttered sourly. "No one was s'posed to be here."

He was a small, dirty man in filthy brown clothing, and he stank of horses. Catelyst knew all the men who worked in their stables, and he was none of them. He was gaunt, with limp blond hair and pale eyes deep-sunk in a bony face, and there was a dagger in his hand.

Catelyst looked at the knife, then at Bran. "No," she said. The word stuck in her throat, the merest whisper.

He must have heard her. "It's a mercy," he said. "He's dead already."

"No," Catelyst said, louder now as she found her voice again. "No, you can't." She spun back toward the window to scream for help, but the man moved faster than she would have believed. One hand clamped down over her mouth and yanked back her head, the other brought the dagger up to her windpipe. The stench of him was overwhelming.

She reached up with both hands and grabbed the blade with all her strength, pulling it away from her throat. She heard him cursing into her ear. Her fingers were slippery with blood, but she would not let go of the dagger. The hand over her mouth clenched more tightly, shutting off her air. Catelyst twisted her head to the side and managed to get a piece of his flesh between her teeth. She bit down hard into his palm. The man grunted in pain. She ground her teeth together