

“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