

Eddard Stark in his face, something as stern and hard as the north. "What am I doing?" she echoed, puzzled. "How can you ask that? What do you imagine I'm doing? I am taking care of your brother. I am taking care of Bran."

"Is that what you call it? You haven't left this room since Bran was hurt. You didn't even come to the gate when Father and the girls went south."

"I said my farewells to them here, and watched them ride out from that window." She had begged Ned not to go, not now, not after what had happened; everything had changed now, couldn't he see that? It was no use. He had no choice, he had told her, and then he left, choosing. "I can't leave him, even for a moment, not when any moment could be his last. I have to be with him, if... if." She took her son's limp hand, sliding his fingers through her own. He was so frail and thin, with no strength left in his hand, but she could still feel the warmth of life through his skin.

Robb's voice softened. "He's not going to die, Mother. Maester Luwin says the time of greatest danger has passed."

"And what if Maester Luwin is wrong? What if Bran needs me and I'm not here?"

"Rickon needs you," Robb said sharply. "He's only three, he doesn't understand what's happening. He thinks everyone has deserted him, so he follows me around all day, clutching my leg and crying. I don't know what to do with him." He paused a moment, chewing on his lower lip the way he'd done when he was little. "Mother, I need you too. I'm trying but I can't... I can't do it all by myself." His voice broke with sudden emotion, and Catelyn remembered that he was only fourteen. She wanted to get up and go to him, but Bran was still holding her hand and she could not move.

Outside the tower, a wolf began to howl. Catelyn trembled, just for a second.

"Bran's." Robb opened the window and let the night air into the stuffy tower room. The howling grew louder. It was a cold and lonely sound, full of melancholy and despair.

"Don't," she told him. "Bran needs to stay warm."

"He needs to hear them sing," Robb said. Somewhere out in Winterfell, a second wolf began to howl in chorus with the first. Then a third, closer. "Shaggydog and Grey Wind," Robb said as their voices rose and fell together. "You can tell them apart if you listen close."

Catelyn was shaking. It was the grief, the cold, the howling of the direwolves. Night after night, the howling and the cold wind and the grey empty castle, on and on they went, never changing, and her boy lying there broken, the sweetest of her children, the gentlest, Bran who loved to laugh and climb and dreamt of knighthood, all gone now, she would never hear him laugh again. Sobbing, she pulled her hand free of his and covered her ears against those terrible howls. "Make them stop!" she cried. "I can't stand it, make them stop, make them stop, kill them all if you must, just make them stop!"

She didn't remember falling to the floor, but there she was, and Robb was lifting her, holding her in strong arms. "Don't be afraid, Mother. They would never hurt him." He helped her to her narrow bed in the corner of the sickroom. "Close your eyes," he said gently. "Rest. Maester Luwin tells me you've hardly slept since Bran's fall."