

they told how afterward Ned had carried Ser Arthur's sword back to the beautiful young sister who awaited him in a castle called Starfall on the shores of the Summer Sea. The Lady Ashara Dayne, tall and fair, with haunting violet eyes. It had taken her a fortnight to marshal her courage, but finally, in bed one night, Catelyn had asked her husband the truth of it, asked him to his face.

That was the only time in all their years that Ned had ever frightened her. "Never ask me about Jon," he said, cold as ice. "He is my blood, and that is all you need to know. And now I will learn where you heard that name, my lady." She had pledged to obey; she told him; and from that day on, the whispering had stopped, and Ashara Dayne's name was never heard in Winterfell again.

Whoever Jon's mother had been, Ned must have loved her fiercely, for nothing Catelyn said would persuade him to send the boy away. It was the one thing she could never forgive him. She had come to love her husband with all her heart, but she had never found it in her to love Jon. She might have overlooked a dozen bastards for Ned's sake, so long as they were out of sight. Jon was never out of sight, and as he grew, he looked more like Ned than any of the trueborn sons she bore him. Somehow that made it worse. "Jon must go," she said now.

"He and Robb are close," Ned said. "I had hoped..."

"He cannot stay here," Catelyn said, cutting him off. "He is your son, not mine. I will not have him." It was hard, she knew, but no less the truth. Ned would do the boy no kindness by leaving him here at Winterfell.

The look Ned gave her was anguished. "You know I cannot take him south. There will be no place for him at court. A boy with a bastard's name... you know what they will say of him. He will be shunned."

Catelyn armored her heart against the mute appeal in her husband's eyes. "They say your friend Robert has fathered a dozen bastards himself."

"And none of them has ever been seen at court!" Ned blazed. "The Lannister woman has seen to that. How can you be so damnably cruel, Catelyn? He is only a boy. He-"

His fury was on him. He might have said more, and worse, but Maester Luwin cut in. "Another solution presents itself," he said, his voice quiet. "Your brother Benjen came to me about Jon a few days ago. It seems the boy aspires to take the black."

Ned looked shocked. "He asked to join the Night's Watch?"

Catelyn said nothing. Let Ned work it out in his own mind; her voice would not be welcome now. Yet gladly would she have kissed the maester just then. His was the perfect solution. Benjen Stark was a Sworn Brother. Jon would be a son to him, the child he would never have. And in time the boy would take the oath as well. He would father no sons who might someday contest with Catelyn's own grandchildren for Winterfell.

Maester Luwin said, "There is great honor in service on the Wall, my lord."

"And even a bastard may rise high in the Night's Watch," Ned reflected. Still, his voice was troubled. "Jon is so young. If he asked this when he was a man grown, that would be one thing, but a boy of fourteen..."