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18th Day of the 10th Moon, 299 AC

Catelyn Stark

Praying at the Sept no longer brought her comfort. Gone were the smell of incense and songs of soft prayer, and the bright-coloured windows were now dull. The small sept was no longer used as a shed now that the siege had ended, but Septon Chayle, Septa Mordane, and their novices had yet to return. Catelyn didn't know if they ever would, for neither war nor the cold was merciful. Once again, she was alone here, for nobody else in Winterfell was a devout believer in the Faith save the Merman Lord's granddaughter. But while Wylla Manderly was a kind girl, she had started avoiding displays of piousness after seeing what savagery the Reachmen had been capable of in the name of the Seven.

And thus, Catelyn was alone here, left with her thoughts and regrets.

She had failed as a mother again. Her girl, her precious little girl, all wild and fierce.

Gone, taken by the Ironborn.

Because *Catelyn* had sent her away, even Myrcella had been hesitant then, but she had insisted.

She had one task—keep her children and the castle safe, and she had failed terribly. They had decided to bait Hightower by a lesser garrison; that much was true. But it had been folly, almost greater than the others, for Baelor had nearly taken the Winterfell. It had been close, so perilously close to succeeding. Just like Karstark and Whitehill, she underestimated Hightower and the Southrons and their determination and ingenuity. After all, nobody fought a war thinking they would lose.

Of course, when Ned returned, he wouldn't blame her.

"It was not your fault Arya perished or Winterfell almost fell," he would say kindly. "Why would you bear the blame for Hightower or Drumm or Greyjoy's ambitions?"

Ned was kind and soft, and he would forgive her.

But Catelyn wasn't sure she could forgive herself. Neither regret nor forgiveness would bring her little, precious Arya back. The North had been teetering perilously close on the brink of defeat, with House Stark surrounded on all sides by zealots and reavers, and Catelyn had begun preparing to meet the Stranger rather than allow Hightower hostages or endure the indignity and humiliation of the zealots.

Yet just as things seemed darkest, all those woes disappeared with a whimper. No, not with a whimper, but with blood and steel and weirwood. Saved by her nephew, not by blood but by marriage. A boy she once thought a threat, the fruit of her husband's infidelity. Not even the Unworthy raised his bastards alongside his trueborn children, teaching them the same lessons!

Catelyn felt like a fool. Where she had seen shadows of danger and seeds of betrayal, kindness and kinship had sown loyalty instead. *Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. Lord of Winterfell. King in*

the North. Yet he remained loyal, even if she could recognise the pride in his gait and unbending will that all highlords carried themselves with.

And he loved his sister-cousin. Catelyn wanted to lash out, to blame him for Arya's death, but she couldn't. Not when she held the blame. Not when he was mourning even more than she was. But where Catelyn wept bitter tears, he shed rivers of blood and built mountains of skulls, yet his vengeance was still burning hot.

She did not know how to face Jon Snow anymore.

Nymeria gently tugged on the hem of her dress, bringing Catelyn out of her lamentations. Her dead daughter's grey direwolf had not left her side ever since they came, not allowing her to grieve. Catelyn's fingers ran through the shaggy fur, and it brought her comfort. Far more comfort than prayer or vigil or rage did, and for it, the Lady of Winterfell was grateful.

She suspected there was more to it, for the wolf had previously been as wild as Arya had, yet it was obedient and only slightly playful. The looks of thinly veiled pity some of the wildlings had given her had not escaped Catelyn either. It was not the pity towards a mother who had lost a child, but something... else. Myrcella had that look, too, if far more subtle. A few years prior, she would have demanded answers.

But Catelyn now knew the burden of the truth. The biggest enemy she had feared for years, the woman that would take away her Ned... had been dead and buried in the crypts for nearly two decades already. It was enough for Catelyn Tully Stark to know that her husband loved her and had kept to his marriage vows. She was tired, and her shoulders were too weary to bear the burden of knowledge. Myrcella would have told her if it was detrimental to House Stark, but she hadn't; thus, she needed not know.

Luwin entered the small sept, bringing his ledgers, coughing softly to announce his presence.

"I have finished going through our supplies and ledgers," he began, "Perhaps it would be prudent to discuss this elsewhere?"

"Perhaps, but there are no eyes or ears here," Catelyn hummed, watching as the previously playful direwolf lazily lolled out her tongue without a care in the world. "Nymeria would have caught their scent."

The maester nervously tugged on his chain as he eyed the wooden statues.

"Wouldn't it be offensive to the Seven to discuss such triflesome matters here?"

"My father always said the Seven rarely care for mortal trifles as much as the Septons do," she dismissed. "Besides, the last moon has shown that the Old Gods hold the power here, in the heart of the North. The Seven Who Are One are the gods of the South, of warmth and the Andals."

It was a bitter truth to swallow, but Catelyn had known for decades, even if she never voiced it before. Even though the Northmen respected her, she still felt like an outsider after many years. Yet Myrcella, a royal princess, had easily discarded her shaky belief in the Seven in favour of Robb, her husband. Catelyn suspected that her lack of piety stemmed from her parents. Neither Cersei nor Robert held much regard for the Seven, for crowns had a way of changing men and women alike.

It was for the better in the end, for Hightower had shown where such pursuits ended.

"Very well," Luwin coughed. "Thanks to... Lord Jon, our coffers and armoury are overflowing, but the problem with food remains. We have enough for a few more moons, but we won't be seeing any new harvests in the snow. Winterfell will have enough to sustain itself for a year or two, but the nearby smallfolk..."

A smallfolk or two growing hungry from their own misfortune or poor planning was never a problem House Stark was responsible for. But having a good chunk of the smallfolk directly paying homage to House Stark starve was another matter entirely. It would weaken House Stark despite the victories on the battlefield.

"We can purchase sheep and cattle from Umber, rye and winter wheat from Manderly," Catelyn mused. "Perhaps even sell the ridiculous amount of lumber Hightower chopped down to cover a part of the costs. Wintertown must not starve."

"Can House Stark afford to be so... generous?" Luwin asked, voice cautious.

"Until the warmth returns next year," Catelyn allowed. "Did you not say yourself that our coffers and armoury are filled to the brim? Can men and women eat gold and steel for loyalty? From hereon, I rescind all taxation on salt. Tell the stewards and the reeves Winterfell shall loosen the fishing permits for the White Knife and the Long Lake, while the smallfolk can expect to pay bigger due in kind later on."

"Only the King, Lord Hand, and master of coin can approve changes in taxation-"

"I am aware," Catelyn scoffed. "But is my husband not Lord Regent of the Realm?"

The creaking of the door grabbed their attention, and Myrcella entered the small sept, her cheeks reddened by the cold outside.

"Is it wise to spend so much coin on smallfolk?" She asked shamelessly, without bothering to hide that she had spied on their talk.

"Perhaps not, but the alternative might not be better," Catelyn exhaled slowly, subtly glaring at Nymeria - if the direwolf could smile, she would be laughing at her. "So many mouths from the Barrowlands and Torrhen's square are also here, and we can let them suffer in winter, true. But what happens when their sons and brothers and husbands return from the war and see their service to House Stark rewarded with nothing but death and callousness?"

"We cannot feed everyone," Myrcella reminded. "Even my grandfather would struggle to feed his own smallfolk despite all the gold in Casterly Rock. In the end, this is the smallfolk's lot. If we start throwing coin to fix their problems, they would forever think House Stark owes them something."

"And your grandfather has the unfortunate misbelief that gold is the solution to all troubles," Catelyn scoffed but continued kindly, "It's merely a temporary solution for those living in Winterfell's vicinity. Soon, Barrowton and Torrhen's Square should be free, relieving us of some of the burden." And transferring the woes and trouble on the heads of Ladies Tallhart and Dustin, who were eager to reclaim their homes. May every last Hightower and Tyrell rot in the seventh circle of hell for their greed. "Besides, I never said we shall grant such boons for free, for there is plenty of work to be done."

It was a first to find the nursery empty.

“Where are Lyarra, Artos, and Edwyn?” Catelyn coldly asked the guardsman, Aren.

“The Princess and Lady Sansa took them out to the godswood to play, m’lady Stark,” he replied.

Catelyn stormed out, suppressing the surge of anger threatening to erupt in her belly. The babes were barely eight moons old, and it was cold outside!

The long walk to the grove allowed time to cool her anger. Luwin had always said that keeping babes inside all the time and depriving them of the tempering of the elements made them sickly. With Winterfell under siege, Catelyn had loathed for her twins or grandson to suffer any risk, but Hightower was now gone.

The overflowing castle was now empty, and the looming dread of the zealous enemy had been dispelled. Nothing was left of them but bones, and the dreadful pyramid of skulls that loomed as high as Winterfell’s walls and could be seen from afar was now inconspicuously covered in white, turning it into a snowy hill for those blissfully unaware.

It was a savage, ruthless deed, befitting of cruel men and brutes—a most dire warning in bone and flesh. A warning that House Stark was not to be trifled with. But the fear and revulsion Catelyn expected never came, instead, the women and children and servants were queasy but *relieved*. Relieved that their plight did not go unavenged, even if that was not the main cause for the gruesome display.

But not all Reachmen were gone.

Paxter Redwyne still remained, Catelyn mused. Yet the proud lord now jumped at his shadow and couldn’t bear to look at meat. Any steel in him had shattered that day when he swallowed a dose of humiliation. Now, there was no fire or defiance in Redwyne, just dull acceptance. A man broken without a battle. His surviving son was much the same. Desmera Redwyne was humiliated in a way that would be deemed scandalous for trying to seduce Jon Snow, of all things.

A part of Catelyn rejoiced. Redwyne deserved all that and more, far more, and they had received mercy only for the usefulness of their fleet. Uncle Brynden had it right when he scorned her father's decision to marry him to some Redwyne harlot.

The chill outside was bearable courtesy of the sun peeking behind the clouds above, but its warmth was far from enough to melt the previous snowfall. The snow in the godswood was pristine white, with a cold innocence to it, unlike the browned slush mingling with mud and other dirt in the courtyards.

The veil of white covered the ash and charred remnants of the fire, but it couldn’t hide the felled tree trunks from the boulders lugged by the trebuchets. Catelyn stopped by the steam-covered hot springs but found nothing and headed to the Heart Tree. The more she approached, the more direwolves she saw lazily sprawled in the surroundings, not paying her or Nymeria any heed.

As she approached, a pleasant singing voice reached her ears. Two of them, in fact. It was Sansa and Myrcella singing in tandem.

*Where Whispering Sound meets rivers wide,
the Hightower once rose.
Yet stone and pride can both be felled
When winter’s shadow grows.*

*Oh, mark the fate of Hightower,
now cold and grey as stone,
for winter's hand has swept it bare,
And left but dust and bone.*

*The flames that crowned its spire bright
have dimmed to ash and coal.
No walls or watch could turn the tide
of winter's frozen roll.*

*Oh, mark the fate of Hightower,
Now cold and grey as stone,
For winter's hand has swept it bare,
And left but dust and bone.*

*For all their lore and all their might,
They bent no knee nor head,
Yet Northmen came with swords and steel,
Till Hightower's blood ran red.*

*Oh, mark the fate of Hightower,
Now cold and grey as stone,
For winter's hand has swept it bare,
And left but dust and bone.*

*Let all remember Hightower's fall,
Their pride was firm but frail;
For no stronghold nor ancient name
Can withstand the winter wail.*

*Oh, mark the fate of Hightower,
Now cold and grey as stone,
For winter's hand has swept it bare,
And left but dust and bone.*

Nymeria rushed forward, playfully nipping at Lady's ears.

The dream-like sight before Catelyn made her pause. Sansa's rosy face was flushed with joy as she sang along to the dark tune, and Catelyn's heart broke a little. Her innocent darling had been touched by the shadow of the war, too. Her favourite tunes were no longer songs of love and chivalry but blood and steel. But at least she looked happy as she sat by Myrcella, who had inherited her grandfather's callousness. The two looked like a vision from a children's tale, seated over a rug made from elk hide on one of the heart tree's roots. Eyes sparkling like pairs of sapphire and emerald amidst the snow, skin as pale as porcelain, and curls of gold and liquid fire framed their faces.

They looked like sisters, then. And perhaps they were. When had Catelyn started to think of Myrcella as her daughter?

Jon Snow was seated between the roots of the Heart Tree, much like Eddard liked to do, his scarred face peaceful as he ran a cloth down Dark Sister's rippled edge. His resemblance to Ned was uncanny at that moment, and Catelyn couldn't help but feel a pang of longing. When would this dastardly war end? When would she see her husband?

Ghost, the snow-bear-sized direwolf, was happily rolling in the fallen snow the same way he did when he was a pup that could fit in Catelyn's palms. Yet there was no trace of that beast that Catelyn had seen ripping through bone, mail, and plate as if it were straw. The sheer size still gave her pause—even when he stopped to lay in the snow, the direwolf reached Catelyn's chin without standing up and towered over Mors Umber when he did.

Rickon was by his side, hurling snowballs at the giggling Children of the Forest hiding amidst the red crown of the weirwood. He soon became fully covered with snow as he failed to dodge in turn.

Before the frozen pond stood the sprawled form of Shaggydog, his black fur like an ink stain on the pristine snow. The poor direwolf was beset by four giggling toddlers wrapped in bundles of fur under Val's watchful eye. Artos and Lyarra were curiously tugging on his swaying tail while Edwyn tried to crawl on his back, and Calla giggled happily while pulling the direwolf's whiskers. If there was any doubt about Jon Snow's parentage, one look at the babe's silver tuft of hair and bright purple eyes washed it all away. For good or bad, his wife's dragonseed looks explained the query away to those not in the know.

It was easy to understand how Ned's ruse remained uncovered. No matter how hard Catelyn tried to find traces of Rhaegar or the House of the Dragon in Jon Snow, she only saw the looks of a Stark. He looked like a more refined mix of young Eddard and Brandon, which had brought her much consternation in the past. Now, she thought it was a good thing.

"Quite the performance," Jon Snow sighed, glancing at Myrcella. "Must've cost a pretty coin for the bard."

Her practised smile turned sly. "All of them offered to compose a song for free. This is merely the one I liked the most."

"Free or not, a bold thing to make such a song for a House not yet fallen and its seat still unconquered. Castles are not so easily torn down, let alone something as big and old and magical as the Hightower."

"As if you would turn around after you're done with the Iron Isles," the princess scoffed. "Or perhaps I'm mistaken, and you're not planning to join up with Robb? Or perhaps even considering forgiving Hightower?"

"Nay, you have the right of it." Snow tilted his head. "Hightower might have gotten away after the Dance because everyone was either too tired to fight or suffered no personal grievance in the case of Cregan Stark, but his offence is greater now, and his armies vanquished."

Catelyn quietly observed the exchange, but her attention was drawn to a few direwolves who padded towards them, led by Lady and Nymeria. They had squirming balls of fur in their jaws, and they gently dropped them by the four babes. Calla Steelsong received a black pup, as did Edwyn, while Lyarra and Artos were now looking at two silver-furred balls with curiosity.

Val appeared nonpulsed while Myrcella and Sansa observed the scene with curiosity.

Jon Snow sighed.

"Val, Sansa," he spoke, face softening. "You'll have to take turns training those four pups."

"Is it wise to have them bond so young?" The wildling beauty asked.

"Perhaps not, but Lady and Nymeria seem to have a sense of mischief," was the amused response. "There are significant benefits, and the drawbacks can be managed, of course. Skinchanging bonds can let your body draw strength from your companion when yours is lacking..."

"And increase the chances of those four surviving all the sickness that takes away many children before they reach ten name days," Myrcella finished, face pensive. "Like Prince Aenys, who was said to be sickly as a child until his dragon hatched?"

"Quite, but somewhat stronger. I suspect the dragonlords' connection to the dragons was very specifically nurtured over the centuries by the Freehold to be unique and wholly benefiting the human. Skinchanging, however, is far more raw and primal a power. Just as the beast can draw power from their master, so can it influence their mind. Such bonds require a firmer hand with the children, too, lest the wildness of the beast bleeds over," Jon explained.

"Can you teach us, Jon?" Sansa asked quietly.

He paused, looking seriously at his red-haired sister as if seeing her for the first time.

"You want to learn skinchanging? It's magic."

"Yes," she echoed, together with Rickon.

"Perhaps if Lady Stark allows it." Jon Snow quirked an eyebrow at Catelyn, startling her. He had not looked at her once, yet somehow knew where she was.

"Mother, please!" Two sets of begging eyes were set on her that instant. "Can we learn? Can we?"

Practising magic was sacrilegious to the Faith. How many tales of beasts walking in the skin of men, and savages turning feral had her own wetnurse scared her with? But could Catelyn deny the advantage that was the bond with a direwolf? Could she deny them their birthright after seeing the power wielded by their half-brother? While Rickon held no interest in the Seven, Sansa was well-versed in the Seven-Pointed Star as any lady aspiring to wed in the South.

"I see no problem for Rickon. Sansa, practising such things will make your marriage prospects below the Neck quite poor," Catelyn noted as her son started jumping excitedly.

"What fools don't know won't hurt them," Myrcella coughed loudly.

"It's not as easy to hide a secret from your spouse as you think," Catelyn offered pointedly. "Secrets and deception are the slow death of love and cordiality."

She would know, for one such secret had almost soured her marriage at the very beginning. Yet it was neither the secret nor deception but the naked proof of infidelity that had irked her.

Her daughter's nose scrunched up. "I've seen more Southrons and pious men than I would like, Mother," she declared with surprising boldness. "If you allow me, I'll wed in a Northern House and come to visit you and Edwyn and my siblings often."

"The matter of your hand in marriage will be for your father to decide," Catelyn exhaled. "Still, I shall try to have preferences heard, Sansa. But I shall not lie to you, for you might be used to seal a marriage alliance, just like I was."

Sansa's face wilted, and she gave a stiff nod. Catelyn ignored the pang in her chest, for such was the fate of the highborn. Love was not a luxury to be considered.

"Robb already slaughtered the Roses of Highgarden, and the Greyjoys of Pyke are gone save for a mad priest and an exiled pirate," Jon mused as he sheathed Dark Sister with a single smooth motion. "Your cousin in the Vale is too young and ruled by a band of craven fence-sitters, and the Dornish have propped up a mummer, thinking themselves clever. Robb has the Westerlands and the Reach at hand, and your lordly uncle controls the biggest army in the Seven Kingdoms right now. Don't worry, sister, your hand won't be exchanged for swords or peace, for only a fool would reward ambition and treason with a beauty such as you."

Sansa wetly blinked at her brother before shyly looking away with a demure smile.

"Quite the silver tongue, Lord Jon," Myrcella drawled. "But such matters are in the hands of Lord Stark in the end. It's the way of nobility."

"Well, it's good that House Stark is not in a spot of desperation and has more marriage alliances than it knows what to do with, then. Tully, Baratheon, Arryn, and now Lannister. Any more, and the realm will think Winterfell is trying to conquer the Seven Kingdoms by marriage," Jon Snow's lips curved dangerously, and then his eyes softened as he gazed at the four toddlers now playing with the direwolf pups. "Alliances aplenty, and neither does Winterfell lack for heirs and spares. Rickon."

"Yes, brother?"

"It's time for your lessons with Luwin."

"Argh, it's boring--"

"Boring or not, it's something any son of House Stark *must* know. Besides, the faster you learn, the quicker your lessons end. Perform well, and if Luwin says you've taken to the lessons well enough, I'll teach you to use an axe."

Rickon's face lit up.

"Truly?"

"Have I ever lied to you, brother?" Her son vigorously shook his head. "Off you run, now."

And just like that, her son dashed through the snow, showing an enthusiasm for the maester's lessons that Catelyn would have previously thought impossible. Worse, she vividly remembered Rickon shirking the lessons she told him to attend two days ago and somehow escaping her designed punishment. Rickon was shaping up to be the worst of Arya and Brandon, and Catelyn feared that he would follow in their folly.

At that moment, she knew she had failed again as a mother. After Ned had become Hand, she had focused on helping Robb, Myrcella, and Arya. Then, the war came, and with it, grieving. Rickon was left with no mother or father to guide him. While she rejoiced at reuniting with her young son, it quickly became clear that her mistakes had consequences. It hurt Catelyn to be faced with a six-year-old rebellious son who only listens to her when his big brother Jon tells him to.

"Sansa, Myrcella," Catelyn's gaze paused on the poor Shaggydog, who was now looking at her pleadingly. "Take the children back to the nursery lest they catch a cold. Calla, too."

They excused themselves while Val possessively picked up Calla in her arms. The spearwife was gorgeous in her bleached leather tunic and white breeches, the touch of wildness enhancing her beauty. With thick, shapely hips, a generous chest, silver-gold hair of Old Valyria, a sharp, aristocratic face, and prideful grey eyes, Val was a man's dream, eclipsing the younger princess Myrcella in looks.

It was a raw beauty, like the golden leaves in autumn or the freshly fallen snow, and just as dangerous. Even Catelyn found her gaze lingering on the woman for longer than appropriate.

"Go with them," Jon turned to his wife, having caught Catelyn's previous hint.

"Jon—"

"You're pregnant, Val," his voice turned as soft as velvet. "No more war or following me in the sea. You shall stay here, safe behind the walls of Winterfell and learn the *Southron* ways as you promised. With Lady Stark's permission, of course."

"Your wife and children are welcome in these halls, Jon Snow," Catelyn offered, marvelling at how things had changed. Two years ago, she would have never even dreamt of uttering such words. Two years to turn her whole world around. "I give my word to guide your spouse as if she were mine own daughter."

"Fine," Val murmured, though she looked rather reluctant. "Suppose the enormous castle isn't half bad. And your kin are kind, and I ought to learn some of the ways of the kneeler lady if you're going to be a kneeler lord."

And just like that, the spearwife melded into the snowy grove with her white clothes. Catelyn shook her head. As pretty as she was, Val the Spearwife was a wildling through and through, and perhaps it was for the best. The woman lacked the ambitions a noble lady would harbour, and her origin, combined with her open disdain for nobility and hierarchy, would prevent Lyanna Stark's son from growing too powerful. It was not Jon Snow she feared, never the boy—or the man he had grown into, but the *claim* of his bloodline. Doubly more so when that claim stretched over the Iron Throne.

Catelyn glanced at the deer-like children hiding between the heart tree's branches. "Walk with me, Jon Snow."

"Lady Stark," he hummed, face inscrutable as they slowly trudged between the snowy grove. "We are in private now—the direwolves will prevent anyone from eavesdropping. I expected more... *caution* from you. I'm even. A woman with nearly inexhaustible patience to suffer a bastard under her husband's roof."

"Not one to mince words, eh, Snow?"

He shrugged. "I never saw the point in it."

"Do you resent me?" The words slipped through her mouth before she could even blink.

Jon Snow paused, craning his neck to gaze at the snow-covered canopy above.

"When I was young, I thought I did," he said honestly. "But then I grew up, and I realised... I never resented you. I resented that I was born a bastard. I saw how you treated Robb and Sansa and Arya and Bran with love and compassion and kindness, and I wanted it for myself, too. I wanted a real

mother—just like you were. I longed for a mother’s love, I wanted to be your son so badly that it hurt.”

Catelyn’s nails dug into her palm. Guilt gnawed at her heart then. And anger, too, anger at Ned for lying. He could have told her the truth, not immediately, but after a few years. But her husband was cunning and never did, for he knew her. He knew that Catelyn would either treat Jon Snow as her nephew or as the danger of the son of Rhaegar and Lyanna living in their halls, raising undue suspicion.

A part of her badly wanted to say she would have done the former, all consequences be damned, but it would be a lie. As Jon Snow had said, Catelyn was a good mother, and any good mother would put her children and their safety first.

“Ned could be cruel at times,” she lamented. “At times, I wished I was your mother. Or that I could learn about the mysterious woman my husband loved so much that he forbade me to speak of her or at least replace her place in Ned’s heart.”

Jon Snow jerked, looking at her with surprise.

“A pity I could not compete with a dead sister,” Catelyn closed her eyes and clasped her hands for a silent prayer. “I don’t like what my husband did, but I understand why. Gods be good, I understand it, and that’s why I can’t be wroth with him.”

“So... you know, then?”

“Ned showed me and Robb your letter before he left for King’s Landing. You know, just in case.” Her smile turned wry. “It would have certainly been easier if you had come from my womb. Perhaps I could have passed you as Robb’s younger twin, but the servants in Riverrun already knew I only gave birth to one child, and you were first seen in Winterfell. Alas, My Lord Father would have never agreed either.”

“Would haves and could haves serve no one.” Jon Snow’s lips twitched. “I would have killed to hear such platitudes a few years prior, but words are wind. Let us put the trifles of the past behind us and speak frankly.”

“Clearing up bad blood and misunderstandings is never in vain,” she offered, impressed by his magnanimity. “I would ask you for your battle plans going forward, now that you have so handily used my moment of anger and grief to secure my permission.”

Jon Snow didn’t hesitate in the slightest. “Free Torrhen’s Square and Barrowton, pacify the Iron Isles.”

“Do you not fear trouble from Paxter’s mariners?” She paused as they reached the wall of fog surrounding the hot spring. “Some of them lost brothers and sons and cousins and uncles when you slaughtered Paxter’s knights and men-at-arms in Wintertown.”

“Angry fools always lash out at the easiest target,” he said with a vicious smile. “The reavers. And... I don’t fear mutinies. The direwolves can sense intent from afar, and Paxter will be my greatest ally in the Redwyne Fleet. In fact, the quicker they try to revolt, the faster I can root them out.”

“I see you have planned out for most matters thoroughly,” Catelyn acknowledged. This was yet another reminder that she was not dealing with a warrior who had just turned eight and ten, but a seasoned commander who had weathered years of adversity and hardships. “What comes after the Iron Islands?”

"It would depend on what Aegon the Mummer does and how the winds of war blow."

"A boy posing as you. The absurdity of the situation is not lost on me here, Jon." Catelyn rubbed her gloved hands to warm her now-freezing digits. Yet the cold didn't seem to bother the young man. For that matter, neither did it bother Sansa, who still wore her unmelting bracelet of ice. "The question, however, remains if this so-called Aegon is aware of the duplicity, or is it a fate bestowed upon him by the Martells and others."

"The claim has changed, but it still remains the same, aiming to grab as much legitimacy through a supposed direct descendant of the Silver Prince," Jon said. "But it doesn't matter in the end. The Aegon I knew wielded the Sword of Kings, and if the rumour is correct, he also does so here. It was convenient to dismiss it as a Blackfyre plot back then, yet now I know for sure this is a mummer's dragon. Regardless, his folly shall be ended, whether by mine hand or Robb's."

A hollow laugh echoed through the godswood. Jon Snow looked twice his age, then. A weary veteran of nearly forty, tired of fighting but fully ready to continue doing it if he had to.

"Yet you don't wish for the throne," Catelyn stated, unable to hide the relief in her heart.

"A crown is a gift of poison." His gaze grew distant. "If you read my letter, you should know I wore one. It was all I ever wanted as a child, all I ever dreamed of, and I loathed it when it landed on my head. Duty is heavier than a mountain. Aye, I can probably fight for the throne, but it would tear my family apart and break an already war-torn realm. For what? To fight against my kin or mourn their death at the hands of others? To become a kinslayer? So my children can squabble for power and have to watch their backs for daggers in the dark, poison, and treacherous lickspittles?"

Jon Snow closed his eyes and continued with a sigh.

"When I close my eyes, I can still hear it sometimes. I can hear what was left of the Northern lords chanting. King in the North. *King in the North!* The fools thought I could prop up the sky while the whole world seemed to be falling apart, and we were broken, surrounded by foes on every side, as the Long Night loomed over us like the headsman's axe. No, it is better for our family that Jon Snow remains the son of Eddard Stark and nothing more."

Cat wrung her hands, feeling nervous. This was more honesty than she had expected. A crushing amount of it... but she had never spoken to Jon Snow before. Why would a woman need to speak to her husband's bastard?

"I don't need to have the sight to know that in the fullness of time, your daughter shall grow to be the spitting image of the most beautiful dragon princess the Seven Kingdoms have ever seen," Catelyn professed.

"The gods play a jest upon me," he laughed, though it lacked amusement. "Thankfully, my wife has enough dragonblood that my children won't raise too many eyebrows."

"Indeed. But it doesn't matter. What do you think of Calla Steelsong becoming the next Lady of Winterfell?"

"My wife would probably slit my throat in my sleep if I did that without her say-so," his eyes sparkled with mirth. "I know what you're trying to do, Lady Stark. You might want to unite any claims, but what good is speaking of alliances between swaddling babes?"

"Were you not the one to say the skinchanging bond shall keep them hale and healthy?"

"Gods willing, yes. But what if Edwyn and Calla grow to hate each other? What if Robb and Myrcella find the match not to their liking or have other considerations later? I want my daughter to marry for love."

They finally reached the end of the grove and stopped fifteen yards from the stone archway leading towards the Great Keep.

"A bastard can marry for love, but a lord and a lady cannot," Catelyn advised softly. "That is not to mean love won't come with time. Do you think I loved your father when we wed? He was but a stranger to me, a man whom they told me I had to share the rest of my life with the day I first saw him. It took years and two children before I could honestly declare I loved Eddard Stark. Fret not about your wife or Myrcella or Robb's objections on the matter. Even if they hold any objections, they shall see reason sooner or later."

"It still remains to be seen where my future fief would be."

"Ah, but both you and I know Ned will never shortchange you. Two crowns broken, Winterfell saved, and proven loyalty beyond any doubt means you *will* become a Lord of prominence. Perhaps the Dreadfort?"

Jon Snow grimaced. "That place is haunted," he hissed out. "Dim and suffocating, ugly and dark, and the stones themselves were mortared with the blood and bones of the flayed."

Catelyn Stark shrugged.

"Pull it down and build it anew. You certainly won't lack for gold or permission. Though I would advise you to include fewer skulls if you do end up building a new castle."

An amused smile crept up his lips, reaching his eyes this time.

"You would trust me to take the place of House Stark's most unruly vassal?"

"It doesn't matter what I want." Cat ruefully shook her head. "It matters what must be done. Many daughters of House Stark have married powerful lords before, but so what? Now that I know you shall be a lord, I must start moving early and ensure your House is intertwined with Winterfell in every way it matters."

"But I could want to have some other lordship. Perhaps somewhere warmer, far away in the South," he pointed out.

Two could play that game. Catelyn couldn't believe she was about to haggle with Jon Snow, not only for the hand of his daughter but also for the seat he would claim.

But a part she had long forgotten stirred deeply inside her. She felt all more energetic and focused than before. It was a wife and a mother's job to ensure future problems were avoided before they could fester. The sense of purpose brought her the much-needed strength and comfort she had lacked.

"Your magic will not be accepted there, Jon," she said, not unkindly. "Even here, men look upon sorcery and magic with a tinge of distrust, and it is a hundred times worse south of the Neck. Perhaps they will accept you for your martial prowess, but what of your children and your grandchildren? You are too smart to lay a claim on Highgarden, for while it is within your grasp, the trouble it will bring you might ruin you. And you love snow and the cold too much to go that far

south. Think on my words, Jon Snow. You don't need to answer me now, but perhaps when the war ends and you return here."

"I shall consider your proposal, Lady Stark. Now, excuse me, I have a campaign to prepare."

"I entrust my son to you, Jon," she whispered, and he halted. "Take him as your page."

"Truly?"

"Yes. Gods know I want to hug him, mother him, and keep him here in Winterfell, away from any and all danger. But he would hate me for it and try to run away. Worse, he might just succeed. For good or ill, Rickon only listens to you now. You had better return him to me alive."

"As if I'd ever let any harm come to my brother," he scoffed, visibly offended at her insinuation.

"Though, I suppose I have to keep axes safe from him more than anything else."

Catelyn couldn't help but chuckle, and Jon shook his head wryly.

With a polite nod, he disappeared into the courtyard and past one of the passageways.

Catelyn's mind was still racing, however. She didn't fear Rickon's well-being, not when he was by his brother's side. Perhaps she was a fool, but a part of her trusted Jon Snow, for he had shown himself leal and capable.

As for her other plans... even if Jon Snow proved stubborn the way Starks tended to be, she could still work on the spearwife. While fierce and brave, Val was still a woman and not made of stone. Women were far less stubborn than men, and even if Jon's proved reluctant, Catelyn could play the matchmaker between the children themselves.

23rd Day of the 10th Moon, 299 AC

Lord of the Crossing

"Bring our guest here," Stevron ordered after reading the letter.

"Yes, Father," Ryman bowed and left the hall.

Being the Lord of the Crossing was hard, especially after Robb Stark destroyed their already questionable reputation, doubly so with so many brothers and cousins, all greedier and more useless than the last. He harboured a slight grudge against Robb Stark for the insult, but the Young Wolf was a dangerous enemy to provoke; Stevron had swallowed the indignity and pretended it had never happened. Ultimately, they had been in the wrong, courtesy of his father's greed.

House Frey did not rise so quickly by being petty against highlords.

Stevron had four children and nine grandchildren, but only three of them were not disappointments. Worse, of his progeny, only Black Walder cared to apply himself in martial matters; all the others were soft and weak.

But Black Walder, just like all of his brothers and cousins, put no stock in the importance of a united family, viewing their kin as foes to fight and compete with instead of family to work together. Thirty of his cousins had perished with Renly, and Black Walder had seen many more of his cousins killed in Harrenhal.

They had no choice, for Stevron had used Robb Stark's blatant banditry to say the treasury was empty and expelled all the Freys not of his loins with a pouch of five dragons so they could either seek their fortune or seek glory to improve their House name.

Alas, in times of bloodshed like these, cunning, guile, and arrogance could never compensate for martial skill. All his kin who had grown lazy, leeching off his father's generosity, had created a band of mewling and useless weaklings, only good for the alliance their mothers brought to House Frey. But if you were allied with everyone, you were allied with nobody.

Stevron would know, for none spoke out against Robb Stark's blatant banditry. Neither Renly nor Joffrey cared to throw any platitudes or even offers to entice the four thousand swords that the Twins could muster. After all, if House Frey were willing to disregard the summons of their liege lord so brazenly, why would anyone trust them?

Even after all the dubious glory his grandson managed to earn on the battlefield, House Frey was looked at with distrust.

Alas, Stevron now saw his father's folly. Reputation was priceless; once it was broken, it was hard to amend. His caution had backfired, too, for staying neutral while sending Freys to join both sides had not earned him any goodwill either.

"Lord Weasel," Mallister had called him scornfully after beating back the Ironborn at Seaguard when Stevron had rode out to patrol his lands for any reaver incursions. "I'm surprised a fence-sitter like you hasn't sent some of your useless weasels to join the Ironmen."

The old eagle had been ready to draw his sword and fight Stevron and his men there and then, and they barely avoided coming to blows. The Frey Lord seethed with fury. Fury at Robb Stark, at Mallister, and at the greedy kings who seemed to pop up like shrooms after rain as of late. Stevron Frey had to join the winning side and join it now if House Frey was to have any standing. Any further hesitation would brand the Freys cravens and cowards and oathbreakers for eternity.

Soon, the prisoner was brought before him. Still dressed in a fine silken doublet, Garth Hightower looked every inch the pious knight though all steel had been taken away.

"My brother shall make you the Lord of the Riverlands if you join his righteous cause, Lord Stevron," he vowed. "I knew you would make the right choice."

Of course, Stevron had not been foolish enough not to treat the man whose brother had once commanded over forty thousand men nearby with disrespect. The Hightower knight was certainly bold. Sneaking on a boat through the Blazewater Bay and then Ironman Bay under the nose of the Ironborn was no mean feat. Stevron had even been tempted to let Ser Garth go, but such actions would offend Robb Stark, and the Frey Lord didn't dare to tempt fate or find out what brutality the Young Wolf was capable of after the infamous Pruning of Highgarden.

Some days, Stevron felt like a mummer balancing on a thin line over a steep chasm.

But the tides had changed, and Stevron had to ride the wave to victory.

"Indeed, I shall send you back to your royal brother," he responded with a thoughtful hum. Ryman, his firstborn, had the audacity to giggle like some vapid maiden, his plump face jiggling with amusement.

“Thank you, my lord, but Baelor has sent me to the Vale, as I said before,” Garth nodded thankfully, giving a wary glance to the wheezing Ryman. “I would be very grateful if my escort is released so I can complete my task.”

“Yes, yes, they will join you too,” Stevron agreed amiably. “Send him off. You have my blessing, Garth Hightower, and you have my parting gift. May your journey be *swift*.”

He waved over the servants to bring a new pair of riding boots as a gift.

“Thank you, Lord Frey. I shall tell my brother of your generosity.”

As soon as Garth was escorted out of the hall, Stevron smacked his son across his face with the back of his hand.

“Father?!”

“Boy, have you lost your wits? Acting like an imbecile?!”

“But you’re planning to kill them anyway,” Ryman hissed, blood dribbling from his busted lip.

“I gave them guest right first, you fool! With the gift given and accepted, our hospitality has officially ended. I have my men ordered to wait for them in ambush on every road out of here, away from my roof.”

His father would have probably killed them under guest right anyway, but Stevron was wary about anything that would see House Frey’s already dwindling reputation diminish further.

But with a single deed, he would declare his loyalty and earn House Frey a dragonsteel sword. Garth Greysteel’s head would be sent to Winterfell or Highgarden. Vigilance would mysteriously disappear until a Qohorik master smith could be contacted, and then Stevron could easily sell some cock and bull story about finding Valyrian Steel on a trip to Essos.

“What next, Grandfather?” his grandson Edwyn asked. As usual, the boy looked as if he was constipated, with his cold face. A pity, if he were slightly more reasonable and more skilled in wielding something other than his lower sword, he could have become a proper heir.

Alas, Stevron was cursed to suffer useless children and grandchildren. At least his youngest bastard half-brother, who served as an acolyte at Ramsgate, had written with very important news just this morning. Otherwise, he would have ended up like Waynwood, who doubtlessly still thought Hightower and Greyjoy had almost conquered the North.

“Now, we call the banners in the name of His Grace, Tommen Baratheon!” Stevron declared righteously. “We cannot let such vile traitors like Waynwood and her fence-sitting ilk back Essosi Pretenders or attack the good Lords of the Riverlands unpunished!”

“Long live King Tommen!”

“Long live King Tommen!”

Author’s Endnote:

I actually had great fun writing this chapter. Obviously, a talentless hack like me who struggles for hours to rhyme three lines had to rely on ChatGPT for some poetry - let me know if you like it or if you’d rather have the song summed up.

A nice change of pace... for once.

Bet y'all had forgotten poor old Garth. A fence-sitter finally makes a choice—for those who forgot, Stevron just expelled some Freys and had them 'join' both sides while preserving the bulk of his forces. I think this is going to be the last Winterfell PoV in quite a while. I wrapped up almost everything I wanted and, after much deliberation, decided to do it via a Catelyn PoV. We have some much-needed family bonding time. Myrcella makes Jon look like a child in the holding grudges Olympics.