



BRAN

It is only another empty castle,” Meera Reed said as she gazed across the desolation of rubble, ruins, and weeds.

No, thought Bran, *it is the Nightfort, and this is the end of the world*. In the mountains, all he could think of was reaching the Wall and finding the three-eyed crow, but now that they were here he was filled with fears. The dream he’d had . . . the dream *Summer* had had . . . *No, I mustn’t think about that dream*. He had not even told the Reeds, though Meera at least seemed to sense that something was wrong. If he never talked of it maybe he could forget he ever dreamed it, and then it wouldn’t have happened and Robb and Grey Wind would still be . . .

“Hodor.” Hodor shifted his weight, and Bran with it. He was tired. They had been walking for hours. *At least he’s not afraid*. Bran was scared of this place, and almost as scared of admitting it to the Reeds. *I’m a prince of the north, a Stark of Winterfell, almost a man grown, I have to be as brave as Robb*.

Jojen gazed up at him with his dark green eyes. “There’s nothing here to hurt us, Your Grace.”

Bran wasn’t so certain. The Nightfort had figured in some of Old Nan’s scariest stories. It was here that Night’s King had reigned, before his name was wiped from the memory of man. This was where the Rat Cook had served the Andal king his prince-and-bacon pie, where the seventy-nine

sentinels stood their watch, where brave young Danny Flint had been raped and murdered. This was the castle where King Sherrit had called down his curse on the Andals of old, where the 'prentice boys had faced the thing that came in the night, where blind Symeon Star-Eyes had seen the hellhounds fighting. Mad Axe had once walked these yards and climbed these towers, butchering his brothers in the dark.

All that had happened hundreds and thousands of years ago, to be sure, and some maybe never happened at all. Maester Luwin always said that Old Nan's stories shouldn't be swallowed whole. But once his uncle came to see Father, and Bran asked about the Nightfort. Benjen Stark never said the tales were true, but he never said they weren't; he only shrugged and said, "We left the Nightfort two hundred years ago," as if that was an answer.

Bran forced himself to look around. The morning was cold but bright, the sun shining down from a hard blue sky, but he did not like the *noises*. The wind made a nervous whistling sound as it shivered through the broken towers, the keeps groaned and settled, and he could hear rats scrabbling under the floor of the great hall. *The Rat Cook's children running from their father*. The yards were small forests where spindly trees rubbed their bare branches together and dead leaves scuttled like roaches across patches of old snow. There were trees growing where the stables had been, and a twisted white weirwood pushing up through the gaping hole in the roof of the domed kitchen. Even Summer was not at ease here. Bran slipped inside his skin, just for an instant, to get the smell of the place. He did not like that either.

And there was no way through.

Bran had told them there wouldn't be. He had told them and *told* them, but Jojen Reed had insisted on seeing for himself. He had had a green dream, he said, and his green dreams did not lie. *They don't open any gates either*, thought Bran.

The gate the Nightfort guarded had been sealed since the day the black brothers had loaded up their mules and garrons and departed for Deep Lake; its iron portcullis lowered, the chains that raised it carried off, the tunnel packed with stone and rubble all frozen together until they were as impenetrable as the Wall itself. "We should have followed Jon," Bran said

when he saw it. He thought of his bastard brother often, since the night that Summer had watched him ride off through the storm. “We should have found the kingsroad and gone to Castle Black.”

“We dare not, my prince,” Jojen said. “I’ve told you why.”

“But there are *wildlings*. They killed some man and they wanted to kill Jon too. Jojen, there were a *hundred* of them.”

“So you said. We are four. You helped your brother, if that was him in truth, but it almost cost you Summer.”

“I know,” said Bran miserably. The direwolf had killed three of them, maybe more, but there had been too many. When they formed a tight ring around the tall earless man, he had tried to slip away through the rain, but one of their arrows had come flashing after him, and the sudden stab of pain had driven Bran out of the wolf’s skin and back into his own. After the storm finally died, they had huddled in the dark without a fire, talking in whispers if they talked at all, listening to Hodor’s heavy breathing and wondering if the wildlings might try and cross the lake in the morning. Bran had reached out for Summer time and time again, but the pain he found drove him back, the way a red-hot kettle makes you pull your hand back even when you mean to grab it. Only Hodor slept that night, muttering “Hodor, hodor,” as he tossed and turned. Bran was terrified that Summer was off dying in the darkness. *Please, you old gods, he prayed, you took Winterfell, and my father, and my legs, please don’t take Summer too. And watch over Jon Snow too, and make the wildlings go away.*

No weirwoods grew on that stony island in the lake, yet somehow the old gods must have heard. The wildlings took their sweet time about departing the next morning, stripping the bodies of their dead and the old man they’d killed, even pulling a few fish from the lake, and there was a scary moment when three of them found the causeway and started to walk out . . . but the path turned and they didn’t, and two of them nearly drowned before the others pulled them out. The tall bald man yelled at them, his words echoing across the water in some tongue that even Jojen did not know, and a little while later they gathered up their shields and spears and marched off north by east, the same way Jon had gone. Bran wanted to leave too, to look for Summer, but the Reeds said no. “We will stay another night,” said Jojen,

“put some leagues between us and the wildlings. You don’t want to meet them again, do you?” Late that afternoon Summer returned from wherever he’d been hiding, dragging his back leg. He ate parts of the bodies in the inn, driving off the crows, then swam out to the island. Meera had drawn the broken arrow from his leg and rubbed the wound with the juice of some plants she found growing around the base of the tower. The direwolf was still limping, but a little less each day, it seemed to Bran. The gods had heard.

“Maybe we should try another castle,” Meera said to her brother. “Maybe we could get through the gate somewhere else. I could go scout if you wanted, I’d make better time by myself.”

Bran shook his head. “If you go east there’s Deep Lake, then Queensgate. West is Icemark. But they’ll be the same, only smaller. All the gates are sealed except the ones at Castle Black, Eastwatch, and the Shadow Tower.”

Hodor said, “Hodor,” to that, and the Reeds exchanged a look. “At least I should climb to the top of the Wall,” Meera decided. “Maybe I’ll see something up there.”

“What could you hope to see?” Jojen asked.

“*Something*,” said Meera, and for once she was adamant.

It should be me. Bran raised his head to look up at the Wall, and imagined himself climbing inch by inch, squirming his fingers into cracks in the ice and kicking footholds with his toes. That made him smile in spite of everything, the dreams and the wildlings and Jon and *everything*. He had climbed the walls of Winterfell when he was little, and all the towers too, but none of them had been so high, and they were only stone. The Wall could *look* like stone, all grey and pitted, but then the clouds would break and the sun would hit it differently, and all at once it would transform, and stand there white and blue and glittering. It was the end of the world, Old Nan always said. On the other side were monsters and giants and ghouls, but they could not pass so long as the Wall stood strong. *I want to stand on top with Meera*, Bran thought. *I want to stand on top and see.*

But he was a broken boy with useless legs, so all he could do was watch from below as Meera went up in his stead.

She wasn't really *climbing*, the way he used to climb. She was only walking up some steps that the Night's Watch had hewn hundreds and thousands of years ago. He remembered Maester Luwin saying the Nightfort was the only castle where the steps had been cut from the ice of the Wall itself. Or maybe it had been Uncle Benjen. The newer castles had wooden steps, or stone ones, or long ramps of earth and gravel. *Ice is too treacherous*. It was his uncle who'd told him that. He said that the outer surface of the Wall wept icy tears sometimes, though the core inside stayed frozen hard as rock. The steps must have melted and refrozen a thousand times since the last black brothers left the castle, and every time they did they shrunk a little and got smoother and rounder and more treacherous.

And smaller. *It's almost like the Wall was swallowing them back into itself*. Meera Reed was very surefooted, but even so she was going slowly, moving from nub to nub. In two places where the steps were hardly there at all she got down on all fours. *It will be worse when she comes down*, Bran thought, watching. Even so, he wished it was him up there. When she reached the top, crawling up the icy knobs that were all that remained of the highest steps, Meera vanished from his sight.

"When will she come down?" Bran asked Jojen.

"When she is ready. She will want to have a good look . . . at the Wall and what's beyond. We should do the same down here."

"Hodor?" said Hodor, doubtfully.

"We might find something," Jojen insisted.

Or something might find us. Bran couldn't say it, though; he did not want Jojen to think he was craven.

So they went exploring, Jojen Reed leading, Bran in his basket on Hodor's back, Summer padding by their side. Once the direwolf bolted through a dark door and returned a moment later with a grey rat between his teeth. *The Rat Cook*, Bran thought, but it was the wrong color, and only as big as a cat. The Rat Cook was white, and almost as huge as a sow . . .

There were a lot of dark doors in the Nightfort, and a lot of rats. Bran could hear them scurrying through the vaults and cellars, and the maze of pitch-black tunnels that connected them. Jojen wanted to go poking around

down there, but Hodor said “*Hodor*” to that, and Bran said “No.” There were worse things than rats down in the dark beneath the Nightfort.

“This seems an old place,” Jojen said as they walked down a gallery where the sunlight fell in dusty shafts through empty windows.

“Twice as old as Castle Black,” Bran said, remembering. “It was the first castle on the Wall, and the largest.” But it had also been the first abandoned, all the way back in the time of the Old King. Even then it had been three-quarters empty and too costly to maintain. Good Queen Alysanne had suggested that the Watch replace it with a smaller, newer castle at a spot only seven miles east, where the Wall curved along the shore of a beautiful green lake. Deep Lake had been paid for by the queen’s jewels and built by the men the Old King had sent north, and the black brothers had abandoned the Nightfort to the rats.

That was two centuries past, though. Now Deep Lake stood as empty as the castle it had replaced, and the Nightfort . . .

“There are ghosts here,” Bran said. Hodor had heard all the stories before, but Jojen might not have. “*Old* ghosts, from before the Old King, even before Aegon the Dragon, seventy-nine deserters who went south to be outlaws. One was Lord Ryswell’s youngest son, so when they reached the barrowlands they sought shelter at his castle, but Lord Ryswell took them captive and returned them to the Nightfort. The Lord Commander had holes hewn in the top of the Wall and he put the deserters in them and sealed them up alive in the ice. They have spears and horns and they all face north. The seventy-nine sentinels, they’re called. They left their posts in life, so in death their watch goes on forever. Years later, when Lord Ryswell was old and dying, he had himself carried to the Nightfort so he could take the black and stand beside his son. He’d sent him back to the Wall for honor’s sake, but he loved him still, so he came to share his watch.”

They spent half the day poking through the castle. Some of the towers had fallen down and others looked unsafe, but they climbed the bell tower (the bells were gone) and the rookery (the birds were gone). Beneath the brewhouse they found a vault of huge oaken casks that boomed hollowly when Hodor knocked on them. They found a library (the shelves and bins

had collapsed, the books were gone, and rats were everywhere). They found a dank and dim-lit dungeon with cells enough to hold five hundred captives, but when Bran grabbed hold of one of the rusted bars it broke off in his hand. Only one crumbling wall remained of the great hall, the bathhouse seemed to be sinking into the ground, and a huge thornbush had conquered the practice yard outside the armory where black brothers had once labored with spear and shield and sword. The armory and the forge still stood, however, though cobwebs, rats, and dust had taken the places of blades, bellows, and anvil. Sometimes Summer would hear sounds that Bran seemed deaf to, or bare his teeth at nothing, the fur on the back of his neck bristling . . . but the Rat Cook never put in an appearance, nor the seventy-nine sentinels, nor Mad Axe. Bran was much relieved. *Maybe it is only a ruined empty castle.*

By the time Meera returned, the sun was only a sword's breath above the western hills. "What did you see?" her brother Jojen asked her.

"I saw the haunted forest," she said in a wistful tone. "Hills rising wild as far as the eye can see, covered with trees that no axe has ever touched. I saw the sunlight glinting off a lake, and clouds sweeping in from the west. I saw patches of old snow, and icicles long as pikes. I even saw an eagle circling. I think he saw me too. I waved at him."

"Did you see a way down?" asked Jojen.

She shook her head. "No. It's a sheer drop, and the ice is so smooth . . . I might be able to make the descent if I had a good rope and an axe to chop out handholds, but . . ."

". . . but not us," Jojen finished.

"No," his sister agreed. "Are you sure this is the place you saw in your dream? Maybe we have the wrong castle."

"No. This is the castle. There is a gate here."

Yes, thought Bran, but it's blocked by stone and ice.

As the sun began to set the shadows of the towers lengthened and the wind blew harder, sending gusts of dry dead leaves rattling through the yards. The gathering gloom put Bran in mind of another of Old Nan's stories, the tale of Night's King. He had been the thirteenth man to lead the

Night's Watch, she said; a warrior who knew no fear. "And that was the fault in him," she would add, "for all men must know fear." A woman was his downfall; a woman glimpsed from atop the Wall, with skin as white as the moon and eyes like blue stars. Fearing nothing, he chased her and caught her and loved her, though her skin was cold as ice, and when he gave his seed to her he gave his soul as well.

He brought her back to the Nightfort and proclaimed her a queen and himself her king, and with strange sorceries he bound his Sworn Brothers to his will. For thirteen years they had ruled, Night's King and his corpse queen, till finally the Stark of Winterfell and Joramun of the wildlings had joined to free the Watch from bondage. After his fall, when it was found he had been sacrificing to the Others, all records of Night's King had been destroyed, his very name forbidden.

"Some say he was a Bolton," Old Nan would always end. "Some say a Magnar out of Skagos, some say Umber, Flint, or Norrey. Some would have you think he was a Woodfoot, from them who ruled Bear Island before the ironmen came. He never was. He was a Stark, the brother of the man who brought him down." She always pinched Bran on the nose then, he would never forget it. "He was a Stark of Winterfell, and who can say? Mayhaps his name was *Brandon*. Mayhaps he slept in this very bed in this very room."

No, Bran thought, *but he walked in this castle, where we'll sleep tonight*. He did not like that notion very much at all. Night's King was only a man by light of day, Old Nan would always say, but the night was his to rule. *And it's getting dark*.

The Reeds decided that they would sleep in the kitchens, a stone octagon with a broken dome. It looked to offer better shelter than most of the other buildings, even though a crooked weirwood had burst up through the slate floor beside the huge central well, stretching slantwise toward the hole in the roof, its bone-white branches reaching for the sun. It was a queer kind of tree, skinnier than any other weirwood that Bran had ever seen and faceless as well, but it made him feel as if the old gods were with him here, at least.

That was the only thing he liked about the kitchens, though. The roof was mostly there, so they'd be dry if it rained again, but he didn't think they would ever get *warm* here. You could feel the cold seeping up through the slate floor. Bran did not like the shadows either, or the huge brick ovens that surrounded them like open mouths, or the rusted meat hooks, or the scars and stains he saw in the butcher's block along one wall. *That was where the Rat Cook chopped the prince to pieces, he knew, and he baked the pie in one of these ovens.*

The well was the thing he liked the least, though. It was a good twelve feet across, all stone, with *steps* built into its side, circling down and down into darkness. The walls were damp and covered with niter, but none of them could see the water at the bottom, not even Meera with her sharp hunter's eyes. "Maybe it doesn't have a bottom," Bran said uncertainly.

Hodor peered over the knee-high lip of the well and said, "*HODOR!*" The word echoed down the well, "Hodorhodorhodorhodor," fainter and fainter, "hodorhodorhodorhodor," until it was less than a whisper. Hodor looked startled. Then he laughed, and bent to scoop a broken piece of slate off the floor.

"Hodor, *don't!*" said Bran, but too late. Hodor tossed the slate over the edge. "You shouldn't have done that. You don't know what's down there. You might have hurt something, or . . . or woken something up."

Hodor looked at him innocently. "Hodor?"

Far, far, far below, they heard the sound as the stone found water. It wasn't a *splash*, not truly. It was more a *gulp*, as if whatever was below had opened a quivering gelid mouth to swallow Hodor's stone. Faint echoes traveled up the well, and for a moment Bran thought he heard something moving, thrashing about in the water. "Maybe we shouldn't stay here," he said uneasily.

"By the well?" asked Meera. "Or in the Nightfort?"

"Yes," said Bran.

She laughed, and sent Hodor out to gather wood. Summer went too. It was almost dark by then, and the direwolf wanted to hunt.

Hodor returned alone with both arms full of deadwood and broken branches. Jojen Reed took his flint and knife and set about lighting a fire while Meera boned the fish she'd caught at the last stream they'd crossed. Bran wondered how many years had passed since there had last been a supper cooked in the kitchens of the Nightfort. He wondered who had cooked it too, though maybe it was better not to know.

When the flames were blazing nicely Meera put the fish on. *At least it's not a meat pie.* The Rat Cook had cooked the son of the Andal king in a big pie with onions, carrots, mushrooms, lots of pepper and salt, a rasher of bacon, and a dark red Dornish wine. Then he served him to his father, who praised the taste and had a second slice. Afterward the gods transformed the cook into a monstrous white rat who could only eat his own young. He had roamed the Nightfort ever since, devouring his children, but still his hunger was not sated. "It was not for murder that the gods cursed him," Old Nan said, "nor for serving the Andal king his son in a pie. A man has a right to vengeance. But he slew a *guest* beneath his roof, and that the gods cannot forgive."

"We should sleep," Jojen said solemnly, after they were full. The fire was burning low. He stirred it with a stick. "Perhaps I'll have another green dream to show us the way."

Hodor was already curled up and snoring lightly. From time to time he thrashed beneath his cloak, and whimpered something that might have been "Hodor." Bran wriggled closer to the fire. The warmth felt good, and the soft crackling of flames soothed him, but sleep would not come. Outside the wind was sending armies of dead leaves marching across the courtyards to scratch faintly at the doors and windows. The sounds made him think of Old Nan's stories. He could almost hear the ghostly sentinels calling to each other atop the Wall and winding their ghostly warhorns. Pale moonlight slanted down through the hole in the dome, painting the branches of the weirwood as they strained up toward the roof. It looked as if the tree was trying to catch the moon and drag it down into the well. *Old gods*, Bran prayed, *if you hear me, don't send a dream tonight. Or if you do, make it a good dream.* The gods made no answer.

Bran made himself close his eyes. Maybe he even slept some, or maybe he was just drowsing, floating the way you do when you are half awake and

half asleep, trying not to think about Mad Axe or the Rat Cook or the thing that came in the night.

Then he heard the noise.

His eyes opened. *What was that?* He held his breath. *Did I dream it? Was I having a stupid nightmare?* He didn't want to wake Meera and Jojen for a bad dream, but . . . *there . . . a soft scuffling sound, far off . . . Leaves, it's leaves rattling off the walls outside and rustling together . . . or the wind, it could be the wind . . .* The sound wasn't coming from outside, though. Bran felt the hairs on his arm start to rise. *The sound's inside, it's in here with us, and it's getting louder.* He pushed himself up onto an elbow, listening. There *was* wind, and blowing leaves as well, but this was something else. *Footsteps.* Someone was coming this way. *Something* was coming this way.

It wasn't the sentinels, he knew. The sentinels never left the Wall. But there might be other ghosts in the Nightfort, ones even more terrible. He remembered what Old Nan had said of Mad Axe, how he took his boots off and prowled the castle halls barefoot in the dark, with never a sound to tell you where he was except for the drops of blood that fell from his axe and his elbows and the end of his wet red beard. Or maybe it wasn't Mad Axe at all, maybe it was the thing that came in the night. The 'prentice boys all saw it, Old Nan said, but afterward when they told their Lord Commander every description had been different. *And three died within the year, and the fourth went mad, and a hundred years later when the thing had come again, the 'prentice boys were seen shambling along behind it, all in chains.*

That was only a story, though. He was just scaring himself. There was no thing that comes in the night, Maester Luwin had said so. If there had ever been such a thing, it was gone from the world now, like giants and dragons. *It's nothing,* Bran thought.

But the sounds were louder now.

It's coming from the well, he realized. That made him even more afraid. Something was coming up from under the ground, coming up out of the dark. *Hodor woke it up. He woke it up with that stupid piece of slate, and now it's coming.* It was hard to hear over Hodor's snores and the thumping of his own heart. Was that the sound blood made dripping from an axe? Or was it the faint, far-off rattling of ghostly chains? Bran listened harder.

Footsteps. It was definitely footsteps, each one a little louder than the one before. He couldn't tell how many, though. The well made the sounds echo. He didn't hear any dripping, or chains either, but there *was* something else . . . a high thin whimpering sound, like someone in pain, and heavy muffled breathing. But the footsteps were loudest. The footsteps were coming closer.

Bran was too frightened to shout. The fire had burned down to a few faint embers and his friends were all asleep. He almost slipped his skin and reached out for his wolf, but Summer might be miles away. He couldn't leave his friends helpless in the dark to face whatever was coming up out of the well. *I told them not to come here*, he thought miserably. *I told them there were ghosts. I told them that we should go to Castle Black.*

The footfalls sounded heavy to Bran, slow, ponderous, scraping against the stone. *It must be huge.* Mad Axe had been a big man in Old Nan's story, and the thing that came in the night had been monstrous. Back in Winterfell, Sansa had told him that the demons of the dark couldn't touch him if he hid beneath his blanket. He almost did that now, before he remembered that he was a prince, and almost a man grown.

Bran wriggled across the floor, dragging his dead legs behind him until he could reach out and touch Meera on the foot. She woke at once. He had never known anyone to wake as quick as Meera Reed, or to be so alert so fast. Bran pressed a finger to his mouth so she'd know not to speak. She heard the sound at once, he could see that on her face; the echoing footfalls, the faint whimpering, the heavy breathing.

Meera rose to her feet without a word and reclaimed her weapons. With her three-pronged frog spear in her right hand and the folds of her net dangling from her left, she slipped barefoot toward the well. Jojen dozed on, oblivious, while Hodor muttered and thrashed in restless sleep. She kept to the shadows as she moved, stepped around the shaft of moonlight as quiet as a cat. Bran was watching her all the while, and even he could barely see the faint sheen of her spear. *I can't let her fight the thing alone*, he thought. Summer was far away, but . . .

. . . he slipped his skin, and reached for Hodor.

It was not like sliding into Summer. That was so easy now that Bran hardly thought about it. This was harder, like trying to pull a left boot on your right foot. It fit all wrong, and the boot was *scared* too, the boot didn't know what was happening, the boot was pushing the foot away. He tasted vomit in the back of *Hodor's* throat, and that was almost enough to make him flee. Instead he squirmed and shoved, sat up, gathered his legs under him—his huge strong legs—and rose. *I'm standing*. He took a step. *I'm walking*. It was such a strange feeling that he almost fell. He could see himself on the cold stone floor, a little broken thing, but he wasn't broken now. He grabbed Hodor's longsword. The breathing was as loud as a blacksmith's bellows.

From the well came a wail, a piercing *creech* that went through him like a knife. A huge black shape heaved itself up into the darkness and lurched toward the moonlight, and the fear rose up in Bran so thick that before he could even *think* of drawing Hodor's sword the way he'd meant to, he found himself back on the floor again with Hodor roaring "*Hodor hodor HODOR*," the way he had in the lake tower whenever the lightning flashed. But the thing that came in the night was screaming too, and thrashing wildly in the folds of Meera's net. Bran saw her spear dart out of the darkness to snap at it, and the thing staggered and fell, struggling with the net. The wailing was still coming from the well, even louder now. On the floor the black thing flopped and fought, screeching, "*No, no, don't, please, DON'T . . .*"

Meera stood over him, the moonlight shining silver off the prongs of her frog spear. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"I'm *SAM*," the black thing sobbed. "Sam, Sam, I'm Sam, let me *out*, you *stabbed* me . . ." He rolled through the puddle of moonlight, flailing and flopping in the tangles of Meera's net. Hodor was still shouting, "Hodor hodor hodor."

It was Jojen who fed the sticks to the fire and blew on them until the flames leapt up crackling. Then there was light, and Bran saw the pale thin-faced girl by the lip of the well, all bundled up in furs and skins beneath an enormous black cloak, trying to shush the screaming baby in her arms. The thing on the floor was pushing an arm through the net to reach his knife, but the loops wouldn't let him. He wasn't any monster beast, or even Mad Axe

drenched in gore; only a big fat man dressed up in black wool, black fur, black leather, and black mail. “He’s a black brother,” said Bran. “Meera, he’s from the Night’s Watch.”

“Hodor?” Hodor squatted down on his haunches to peer at the man in the net. “Hodor,” he said again, hooting.

“The Night’s Watch, yes.” The fat man was still breathing like a bellows. “I’m a brother of the Watch.” He had one cord under his chins, forcing his head up, and others digging deep into his cheeks. “I’m a crow, please. Let me out of this.”

Bran was suddenly uncertain. “Are you the three-eyed crow?” *He can’t be the three-eyed crow.*

“I don’t think so.” The fat man rolled his eyes, but there were only two of them. “I’m only Sam. Samwell Tarly. Let me *out*, it’s hurting me.” He began to struggle again.

Meera made a disgusted sound. “Stop flopping around. If you tear my net I’ll throw you back down the well. Just lie still and I’ll untangle you.”

“Who are you?” Jojen asked the girl with the baby.

“Gilly,” she said. “For the gillyflower. He’s Sam. We never meant to scare you.” She rocked her baby and murmured at it, and finally it stopped crying.

Meera was untangling the fat brother. Jojen went to the well and peered down. “Where did you come from?”

“From Craster’s,” the girl said. “Are you the one?”

Jojen turned to look at her. “The one?”

“He said that Sam wasn’t the one,” she explained. “There was someone else, he said. The one he was sent to find.”

“Who said?” Bran demanded.

“Coldhands,” Gilly answered softly.

Meera peeled back one end of her net, and the fat man managed to sit up. He was shaking, Bran saw, and still struggling to catch his breath. “He said there would be people,” he huffed. “People in the castle. I didn’t know you’d be right at the top of the steps, though. I didn’t know you’d throw a

net on me or stab me in the stomach.” He touched his belly with a black-gloved hand. “Am I bleeding? I can’t see.”

“It was just a poke to get you off your feet,” said Meera. “Here, let me have a look.” She went to one knee, and felt around his navel. “You’re wearing *mail*. I never got near your skin.”

“Well, it hurt all the same,” Sam complained.

“Are you *really* a brother of the Night’s Watch?” Bran asked.

The fat man’s chins jiggled when he nodded. His skin looked pale and saggy. “Only a steward. I took care of Lord Mormont’s ravens.” For a moment he looked like he was going to cry. “I lost them at the Fist, though. It was my fault. I got us lost too. I couldn’t even find the Wall. It’s a hundred leagues long and seven hundred feet high and *I couldn’t find it!*”

“Well, you’ve found it now,” said Meera. “Lift your rump off the ground, I want my net back.”

“How did you get through the Wall?” Jojen demanded as Sam struggled to his feet. “Does the well lead to an underground river, is that where you came from? You’re not even wet . . .”

“There’s a gate,” said fat Sam. “A hidden gate, as old as the Wall itself. *The Black Gate*, he called it.”

The Reeds exchanged a look. “We’ll find this gate at the bottom of the well?” asked Jojen.

Sam shook his head. “*You* won’t. I have to take you.”

“Why?” Meera demanded. “If there’s a gate . . .”

“You won’t find it. If you did it wouldn’t open. Not for you. It’s the *Black Gate*.” Sam plucked at the faded black wool of his sleeve. “Only a man of the Night’s Watch can open it, he said. A Sworn Brother who has said his words.”

“*He* said.” Jojen frowned. “This . . . Coldhands?”

“That wasn’t his true name,” said Gilly, rocking. “We only called him that, Sam and me. His hands were cold as ice, but he saved us from the dead men, him and his ravens, and he brought us here on his elk.”

“His elk?” said Bran, wonderstruck.

“His elk?” said Meera, startled.

“His *ravens*?” said Jojen.

“Hodor?” said Hodor.

“Was he green?” Bran wanted to know. “Did he have antlers?”

The fat man was confused. “The elk?”

“*Coldhands*,” said Bran impatiently. “The green men ride on elks, Old Nan used to say. Sometimes they have antlers too.”

“He wasn’t a green man. He wore blacks, like a brother of the Watch, but he was pale as a wight, with hands so cold that at first I was afraid. The wights have blue eyes, though, and they don’t have tongues, or they’ve forgotten how to use them.” The fat man turned to Jojen. “He’ll be waiting. We should go. Do you have anything warmer to wear? The Black Gate is cold, and the other side of the Wall is even colder. You—”

“Why didn’t he come with you?” Meera gestured toward Gilly and her babe. “*They* came with you, why not him? Why didn’t you bring him through this Black Gate too?”

“He . . . he can’t.”

“Why not?”

“The Wall. The Wall is more than just ice and stone, he said. There are spells woven into it . . . old ones, and strong. He cannot pass beyond the Wall.”

It grew very quiet in the castle kitchen then. Bran could hear the soft crackle of the flames, the wind stirring the leaves in the night, the creak of the skinny weirwood reaching for the moon. *Beyond the gates the monsters live, and the giants and the ghouls*, he remembered Old Nan saying, *but they cannot pass so long as the Wall stands strong. So go to sleep, my little Brandon, my baby boy. You needn’t fear. There are no monsters here.*

“I am not the one you were told to bring,” Jojen Reed told fat Sam in his stained and baggy blacks. “*He* is.”

“Oh.” Sam looked down at him uncertainly. It might have been just then that he realized Bran was crippled. “I don’t . . . I’m not strong enough to carry you, I . . .”

“Hodor can carry me.” Bran pointed at his basket. “I ride in that, up on his back.”

Sam was staring at him. “You’re Jon Snow’s brother. The one who fell . . .”

“No,” said Jojen. “That boy is dead.”

“Don’t tell,” Bran warned. “Please.”

Sam looked confused for a moment, but finally he said, “I . . . I can keep a secret. Gilly too.” When he looked at her, the girl nodded. “Jon . . . Jon was *my* brother too. He was the best friend I ever had, but he went off with Qhorin Halfhand to scout the Frostfangs and never came back. We were waiting for him on the Fist when . . . when . . .”

“Jon’s here,” Bran said. “Summer saw him. He was with some wildlings, but they killed a man and Jon took his horse and escaped. I bet he went to Castle Black.”

Sam turned big eyes on Meera. “You’re certain it was Jon? You saw him?”

“I’m Meera,” Meera said with a smile. “Summer is . . .”

A shadow detached itself from the broken dome above and leapt down through the moonlight. Even with his injured leg, the wolf landed as light and quiet as a snowfall. The girl Gilly made a frightened sound and clutched her babe so hard against her that it began to cry again.

“He won’t hurt you,” Bran said. “*That’s* Summer.”

“Jon said you all had wolves.” Sam pulled off a glove. “I know Ghost.” He held out a shaky hand, the fingers white and soft and fat as little sausages. Summer padded closer, sniffed them, and gave the hand a lick.

That was when Bran made up his mind. “We’ll go with you.”

“All of you?” Sam seemed surprised by that.

Meera ruffled Bran’s hair. “He’s our prince.”

Summer circled the well, sniffing. He paused by the top step and looked back at Bran. *He wants to go.*

“Will Gilly be safe if I leave her here till I come back?” Sam asked them.

“She should be,” said Meera. “She’s welcome to our fire.”

Jojen said, "The castle is empty."

Gilly looked around. "Craster used to tell us tales of castles, but I never knew they'd be so big."

It's only the kitchens. Bran wondered what she'd think when she saw Winterfell, if she ever did.

It took them a few minutes to gather their things and hoist Bran into his wicker seat on Hodor's back. By the time they were ready to go, Gilly sat nursing her babe by the fire. "You'll come back for me," she said to Sam.

"As soon as I can," he promised, "then we'll go somewhere warm." When he heard that, part of Bran wondered what he was doing. *Will I ever go someplace warm again?*

"I'll go first, I know the way." Sam hesitated at the top. "There's just so many *steps*," he sighed, before he started down. Jojen followed, then Summer, then Hodor with Bran riding on his back. Meera took the rear, with her spear and net in hand.

It was a long way down. The top of the well was bathed in moonlight, but it grew smaller and dimmer every time they went around. Their footsteps echoed off the damp stones, and the water sounds grew louder. "Should we have brought torches?" Jojen asked.

"Your eyes will adjust," said Sam. "Keep one hand on the wall and you won't fall."

The well grew darker and colder with every turn. When Bran finally lifted his head around to look back up the shaft, the top of the well was no bigger than a half-moon. "*Hodor*," Hodor whispered, "*Hodorhodorhodorhodorhodorhodor*," the well whispered back. The water sounds were close, but when Bran peered down he saw only blackness.

A turn or two later Sam stopped suddenly. He was a quarter of the way around the well from Bran and Hodor and six feet farther down, yet Bran could barely see him. He could see the door, though. *The Black Gate*, Sam had called it, but it wasn't black at all.

It was white weirwood, and there was a face on it.

A glow came from the wood, like milk and moonlight, so faint it scarcely seemed to touch anything beyond the door itself, not even Sam standing

right before it. The face was old and pale, wrinkled and shrunken. *It looks dead.* Its mouth was closed, and its eyes; its cheeks were sunken, its brow withered, its chin sagging. *If a man could live for a thousand years and never die but just grow older, his face might come to look like that.*

The door opened its eyes.

They were white too, and blind. “Who are you?” the door asked, and the well whispered, “*Who-who-who-who-who-who-who.*”

“I am the sword in the darkness,” Samwell Tarly said. “I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers. I am the shield that guards the realms of men.”

“Then pass,” the door said. Its lips opened, wide and wider and wider still, until nothing at all remained but a great gaping mouth in a ring of wrinkles. Sam stepped aside and waved Jojen through ahead of him. Summer followed, sniffing as he went, and then it was Bran’s turn. Hodor ducked, but not low enough. The door’s upper lip brushed softly against the top of Bran’s head, and a drop of water fell on him and ran slowly down his nose. It was strangely warm, and salty as a tear.