

## JON

Jon climbed the steps slowly, trying not to think that this might be the last time ever. Ghost padded silently beside him. Outside, snow swirled through the castle gates, and the yard was all noise and chaos, but inside the thick stone walls it was still warm and quiet. Too quiet for Jon's liking.

He reached the landing and stood for a long moment, afraid. Ghost nuzzled at his hand. He took courage from that. He straightened, and entered the room.

Lady Stark was there beside his bed. She had been there, day and night, for close on a fortnight. Not for a moment had she left Bran's side. She had her meals brought to her there, and chamber pots as well, and a small hard bed to sleep on, though it was said she had scarcely slept at all. She fed him herself, the honey and water and herb mixture that sustained life. Not once did she leave the room. So Jon had stayed away.

But now there was no more time.

He stood in the door for a moment, afraid to speak, afraid to come closer. The window was open. Below, a wolf howled. Ghost heard and lifted his head.

Lady Stark looked over. For a moment she did not seem to recognize him. Finally she blinked. "What are *you* doing here?" she asked in a voice strangely flat and emotionless.

"I came to see Bran," Jon said. "To say good-bye."

Her face did not change. Her long auburn hair was dull and tangled. She looked as though she had aged twenty years. "You've said it. Now go away."

Part of him wanted only to flee, but he knew that if he did he might never see Bran again. He took a nervous step into the room. "Please," he said.

Something cold moved in her eyes. "I told you to leave," she said. "We don't want you here."

Once that would have sent him running. Once that might even have made him cry. Now it only made him angry. He would be a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch soon, and face worse dangers than Catelyn Tully Stark. "He's my brother," he said.

"Shall I call the guards?"

"Call them," Jon said, defiant. "You can't stop me from seeing him." He crossed the room, keeping the bed between them, and looked down on Bran where he lay.

She was holding one of his hands. It looked like a claw. This was not the Bran he remembered. The flesh had all gone from him. His skin stretched tight over bones like sticks. Under the blanket, his legs bent in ways that made Jon sick. His eyes were sunken deep into black pits; open, but they saw nothing. The fall had shrunked him somehow. He looked half a leaf, as if the first strong wind would carry him off to his grave.

Yet under the frail cage of those shattered ribs, his chest rose and fell with each shallow breath.

"Bran," he said, "I'm sorry I didn't come before. I was afraid." He could feel the tears rolling down his cheeks. Jon no longer cared. "Don't die, Bran. Please. We're all waiting for you to wake up. Me and Robb and the girls, everyone..."

Lady Stark was watching. She had not raised a cry. Jon took that for acceptance. Outside the window, the direwolf howled again. The wolf that Bran had not had time to name.

"I have to go now," Jon said. "Uncle Benjen is waiting. I'm to go north to the Wall. We have to leave today, before the snows come." He remembered how excited Bran had been at the prospect of the journey. It was more than he could bear, the thought of leaving him behind like this. Jon brushed away his tears, leaned over, and kissed his brother lightly on the lips.

"I wanted him to stay here with me," Lady Stark said softly.

Jon watched her, wary. She was not even looking at him. She was talking to him, but for a part of her, it was as though he were not even in the

room.

“I prayed for it,” she said dully. “He was my special boy. I went to the sept and prayed seven times to the seven faces of god that Ned would change his mind and leave him here with me. Sometimes prayers are answered.”

Jon did not know what to say. “It wasn’t your fault,” he managed after an awkward silence.

Her eyes found him. They were full of poison. “I need none of your absolution, bastard.”

Jon lowered his eyes. She was cradling one of Bran’s hands. He took the other, squeezed it. Fingers like the bones of birds. “Good-bye,” he said.

He was at the door when she called out to him. “Jon,” she said. He should have kept going, but she had never called him by his name before. He turned to find her looking at his face, as if she were seeing it for the first time.

“Yes?” he said.

“It should have been you,” she told him. Then she turned back to Bran and began to weep, her whole body shaking with the sobs. Jon had never seen her cry before.

It was a long walk down to the yard.

Outside, everything was noise and confusion. Wagons were being loaded, men were shouting, horses were being harnessed and saddled and led from the stables. A light snow had begun to fall, and everyone was in an uproar to be off.

Robb was in the middle of it, shouting commands with the best of them. He seemed to have grown of late, as if Bran’s fall and his mother’s collapse had somehow made him stronger. Grey Wind was at his side.

“Uncle Benjen is looking for you,” he told Jon. “He wanted to be gone an hour ago.”

“I know,” Jon said. “Soon.” He looked around at all the noise and confusion. “Leaving is harder than I thought.”

“For me too,” Robb said. He had snow in his hair, melting from the heat of his body. “Did you see him?”

Jon nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“He’s not going to die,” Robb said. “I know it.”

“You Starks are hard to kill,” Jon agreed. His voice was flat and tired. The visit had taken all the strength from him.

Robb knew something was wrong. “My mother...”

“She was... very kind,” Jon told him.

Robb looked relieved. “Good.” He smiled. “The next time I see you, you’ll be all in black.”

Jon forced himself to smile back. “It was always my color. How long do you think it will be?”

“Soon enough,” Robb promised. He pulled Jon to him and embraced him fiercely. “Farewell, Snow.”

Jon hugged him back. “And you, Stark. Take care of Bran.”

“I will.” They broke apart and looked at each other awkwardly. “Uncle Benjen said to send you to the stables if I saw you,” Robb finally said.

“I have one more farewell to make,” Jon told him.

“Then I haven’t seen you,” Robb replied. Jon left him standing there in the snow, surrounded by wagons and wolves and horses. It was a short walk to the armory. He picked up his package and took the covered bridge across to the Keep.

Arya was in her room, packing a polished ironwood chest that was bigger than she was. Nymeria was helping. Arya would only have to point, and the wolf would bound across the room, snatch up some wisp of silk in her jaws, and fetch it back. But when she smelled Ghost, she sat down on her haunches and yelped at them.

Arya glanced behind her, saw Jon, and jumped to her feet. She threw her skinny arms tight around his neck. “I was afraid you were gone,” she said, her breath catching in her throat. “They wouldn’t let me out to say good-bye.”

“What did you do now?” Jon was amused.

Arya disentangled herself from him and made a face. “Nothing. I was all packed and everything.” She gestured at the huge chest, no more than a third full, and at the clothes that were scattered all over the room. “Septa Mordane says I have to do it all over. My things weren’t properly folded, she says. A proper southron lady doesn’t just throw her clothes inside her chest like old rags, she says.”

“Is that what you did, little sister?”

“Well, they’re going to get all messed up anyway,” she said. “Who cares how they’re folded?”

“Septa Mordane,” Jon told her. “I don’t think she’d like Nymeria helping, either.” The she-wolf regarded him silently with her dark golden eyes. “It’s just as well. I have something for you to take with you, and it has to be packed very carefully.”

Her face lit up. “A present?”

“You could call it that. Close the door.”

Wary but excited, Arya checked the hall. “Nymeria, here. Guard.” She left the wolf out there to warn of intruders and closed the door. By then Jon had pulled off the rags he’d wrapped it in. He held it out to her.

Arya’s eyes went wide. Dark eyes, like his. “A sword,” she said in a small, hushed breath.

The scabbard was soft grey leather, supple as sin. Jon drew out the blade slowly, so she could see the deep blue sheen of the steel. “This is no toy,” he told her. “Be careful you don’t cut yourself. The edges are sharp enough to shave with.”

“Girls don’t shave,” Arya said.

“Maybe they should. Have you ever seen the septa’s legs?”

She giggled at him. “It’s so skinny.”

“So are you,” Jon told her. “I had Mikken make this special. The bravos use swords like this in Pentos and Myr and the other Free Cities. It won’t

hack a man's head off, but it can poke him full of holes if you're fast enough."

"I can be fast," Arya said.

"You'll have to work at it every day." He put the sword in her hands, showed her how to hold it, and stepped back. "How does it feel? Do you like the balance?"

"I think so," Arya said.

"First lesson," Jon said. "Stick them with the pointy end."

Arya gave him a *whap* on the arm with the flat of her blade. The blow stung, but Jon found himself grinning like an idiot. "I know which end to use," Arya said. A doubtful look crossed her face. "Septa Mordane will take it away from me."

"Not if she doesn't know you have it," Jon said.

"Who will I practice with?"

"You'll find someone," Jon promised her. "King's Landing is a true city, a thousand times the size of Winterfell. Until you find a partner, watch how they fight in the yard. Run, and ride, make yourself strong. And whatever you do..."

Arya knew what was coming next. They said it together.

"...don't... tell... Sansa!"

Jon messed up her hair. "I will miss you, little sister."

Suddenly she looked like she was going to cry. "I wish you were coming with us."

"Different roads sometimes lead to the same castle. Who knows?" He was feeling better now. He was not going to let himself be sad. "I better go. I'll spend my first year on the Wall emptying chamber pots if I keep Uncle Ben waiting any longer."

Arya ran to him for a last hug. "Put down the sword first," Jon warned her, laughing. She set it aside almost shyly and showered him with kisses.

When he turned back at the door, she was holding it again, trying it for balance. "I almost forgot," he told her. "All the best swords have names."

“Like Ice,” she said. She looked at the blade in her hand. “Does this have a name? Oh, tell me.”

“Can’t you guess?” Jon teased. “Your very favorite thing.”

Arya seemed puzzled at first. Then it came to her. She was that quick. They said it together:

*“Needle!”*

The memory of her laughter warmed him on the long ride north.