

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 shrunken 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..."