

JON

Whitetree, the village was named on Sam's old maps. Jon did not think it much of a village. Four tumbledown one-room houses of unmortared stone surrounded an empty sheepfold and a well. The houses were roofed with sod, the windows shuttered with ragged pieces of hide. And above them loomed the pale limbs and dark red leaves of a monstrous great weirwood.

It was the biggest tree Jon Snow had ever seen, the trunk near eight feet wide, the branches spreading so far that the entire village was shaded beneath their canopy. The size did not disturb him so much as the face... the mouth especially, no simple carved slash, but a jagged hollow large enough to swallow a sheep.

Those are not sheep bones, though. Nor is that a sheep's skull in the ashes.

"An old tree." Mormont sat his horse, frowning. "*Old*," his raven agreed from his shoulder. "*Old, old, old.*"

"And powerful." Jon could feel the power.

Thoren Smallwood dismounted beside the trunk, dark in his plate and mail. "Look at that face. Small wonder men feared them, when they first came to Westeros. I'd like to take an axe to the bloody thing myself."

Jon said, "My lord father believed no man could tell a lie in front of a heart tree. The old gods know when men are lying."

"My father believed the same," said the Old Bear. "Let me have a look at that skull."

Jon dismounted. Slung across his back in a black leather shoulder sheath was Longclaw, the hand-and-a-half bastard blade the Old Bear had given him for saving his life. *A bastard sword for a bastard*, the men joked. The hilt had been fashioned new for him, adorned with a wolf's-head pommel in pale stone, but the blade itself was Valyrian steel, old and light and deadly sharp.

He knelt and reached a gloved hand down into the maw. The inside of the hollow was red with dried sap and blackened by fire. Beneath the skull he saw another, smaller, the jaw broken off. It was half-buried in ash and bits of bone.

When he brought the skull to Mormont, the Old Bear lifted it in both hands and stared into the empty sockets. “The wildlings burn their dead. We’ve always known that. Now I wished I’d asked them why, when there were still a few around to ask.”

Jon Snow remembered the wight rising, its eyes shining blue in the pale dead face. He knew why, he was certain.

“Would that bones could talk,” the Old Bear grumbled. “This fellow could tell us much. How he died. Who burned him, and why. Where the wildlings have gone.” He sighed. “The children of the forest could speak to the dead, it’s said. But I can’t.” He tossed the skull back into the mouth of the tree, where it landed with a puff of fine ash. “Go through all these houses. Giant, get to the top of this tree, have a look. I’ll have the hounds brought up too. Perchance this time the trail will be fresher.” His tone did not suggest that he held out much hope of the last.

Two men went through each house, to make certain nothing was missed. Jon was paired with dour Eddison Tollett, a squire grey of hair and thin as a pike, whom the other brothers called Dolorous Edd. “Bad enough when the dead come walking,” he said to Jon as they crossed the village, “now the Old Bear wants them talking as well? No good will come of *that*, I’ll warrant. And who’s to say the bones wouldn’t lie? Why should death make a man truthful, or even clever? The dead are likely dull fellows, full of tedious complaints—the ground’s too cold, my gravestone should be larger, why does *he* get more worms than I do...”

Jon had to stoop to pass through the low door. Within he found a packed dirt floor. There were no furnishings, no sign that people had lived here but for some ashes beneath the smoke hole in the roof. “What a dismal place to live,” he said.

“I was born in a house much like this,” declared Dolorous Edd. “Those were my enchanted years. Later I fell on hard times.” A nest of dry straw

bedding filled one corner of the room. Edd looked at it with longing. "I'd give all the gold in Casterly Rock to sleep in a bed again."

"You call that a bed?"

"If it's softer than the ground and has a roof over it, I call it a bed." Dolorous Edd sniffed the air. "I smell dung."

The smell was very faint. "Old dung," said Jon. The house felt as though it had been empty for some time. Kneeling, he searched through the straw with his hands to see if anything had been concealed beneath, then made a round of the walls. It did not take very long. "There's nothing here."

Nothing was what he had expected; Whitetree was the fourth village they had passed, and it had been the same in all of them. The people were gone, vanished with their scant possessions and whatever animals they may have had. None of the villages showed any signs of having been attacked. They were simply... empty. "What do you think happened to them all?" Jon asked.

"Something worse than we can imagine," suggested Dolorous Edd. "Well, *I* might be able to imagine it, but I'd sooner not. Bad enough to know you're going to come to some awful end without thinking about it aforetime."

Two of the hounds were sniffing around the door as they reemerged. Other dogs ranged through the village. Chett was cursing them loudly, his voice thick with the anger he never seemed to put aside. The light filtering through the red leaves of the weirwood made the boils on his face look even more inflamed than usual. When he saw Jon his eyes narrowed; there was no love lost between them.

The other houses had yielded no wisdom. "*Gone*," cried Mormont's raven, flapping up into the weirwood to perch above them. "*Gone, gone, gone.*"

"There were wildlings at Whitetree only a year ago." Thoren Smallwood looked more a lord than Mormont did, clad in Ser Jaremy Rykker's gleaming black mail and embossed breastplate. His heavy cloak was richly trimmed with sable, and clasped with the crossed hammers of the

Rykkers, wrought in silver. Ser Jeremy's cloak, once... but the wight had claimed Ser Jeremy, and the Night's Watch wasted nothing.

"A year ago Robert was king, and the realm was at peace," declared Jarman Buckwell, the square stolid man who commanded the scouts. "Much can change in a year's time."

"One thing hasn't changed," Ser Mallador Locke insisted. "Fewer wildlings means fewer worries. I won't mourn, whatever's become of them. Raiders and murderers, the lot of them."

Jon heard a rustling from the red leaves above. Two branches parted, and he glimpsed a little man moving from limb to limb as easily as a squirrel. Bedwyck stood no more than five feet tall, but the grey streaks in his hair showed his age. The other rangers called him Giant. He sat in a fork of the tree over their heads and said, "There's water to the north. A lake, might be. A few flint hills rising to the west, not very high. Nothing else to see, my lords."

"We might camp here tonight," Smallwood suggested.

The Old Bear glanced up, searching for a glimpse of sky through the pale limbs and red leaves of the weirwood. "No," he declared. "Giant, how much daylight remains to us?"

"Three hours, my lord."

"We'll press on north," Mormont decided. "If we reach this lake, we can make camp by the shore, perchance catch a few fish. Jon, fetch me paper, it's past time I wrote Maester Aemon."

Jon found parchment, quill, and ink in his saddlebag and brought them to the Lord Commander. *At Whitetree*, Mormont scrawled. *The fourth village. All empty. The wildlings are gone.* "Find Tarly and see that he gets this on its way," he said as he handed Jon the message. When he whistled, his raven came flapping down to land on his horse's head. "*Corn*," the raven suggested, bobbing. The horse whickered.

Jon mounted his garron, wheeled him about, and trotted off. Beyond the shade of the great weirwood the men of the Night's Watch stood beneath lesser trees, tending their horses, chewing strips of salt beef,

pissing, scratching, and talking. When the command was given to move out again, the talk died, and they climbed back into their saddles. Jarman Buckwell's scouts rode out first, with the vanguard under Thoren Smallwood heading the column proper. Then came the Old Bear with the main force, Ser Mallador Locke with the baggage train and packhorses, and finally Ser Ottyn Wythers and the rear guard. Two hundred men all told, with half again as many mounts.

By day they followed game trails and streambeds, the "ranger's roads" that led them ever deeper into the wilderness of leaf and root. At night they camped beneath a starry sky and gazed up at the comet. The black brothers had left Castle Black in good spirits, joking and trading tales, but of late the brooding silence of the wood seemed to have sombered them all. Jests had grown fewer and tempers shorter. No one would admit to being afraid—they were men of the Night's Watch, after all—but Jon could feel the unease. Four empty villages, no wildlings anywhere, even the game seemingly fled. The haunted forest had never seemed more haunted, even veteran rangers agreed.

As he rode, Jon peeled off his glove to air his burned fingers. *Ugly things*. He remembered suddenly how he used to muss Arya's hair. His little stick of a sister. He wondered how she was faring. It made him a little sad to think that he might never muss her hair again. He began to flex his hand, opening and closing the fingers. If he let his sword hand stiffen and grow clumsy, it well might be the end of him, he knew. A man needed his sword beyond the Wall.

Jon found Samwell Tarly with the other stewards, watering his horses. He had three to tend: his own mount, and two packhorses, each bearing a large wire-and-wicker cage full of ravens. The birds flapped their wings at Jon's approach and screamed at him through the bars. A few shrieks sounded suspiciously like words. "Have you been teaching them to talk?" he asked Sam.

"A few words. Three of them can say *snow*."

"One bird croaking my name was bad enough," said Jon, "and snow's nothing a black brother wants to hear about." Snow often meant death in the

north.

“Was there anything in Whitetree?”

“Bones, ashes, and empty houses.” Jon handed Sam the roll of parchment. “The Old Bear wants word sent back to Aemon.”

Sam took a bird from one of the cages, stroked its feathers, attached the message, and said, “Fly home now, brave one. Home.” The raven *quorked* something unintelligible back at him, and Sam tossed it into the air. Flapping, it beat its way skyward through the trees. “I wish he could carry me with him.”

“Still?”

“Well,” said Sam, “yes, but... I’m not as frightened as I was, truly. The first night, every time I heard someone getting up to make water, I thought it was wildlings creeping in to slit my throat. I was afraid that if I closed my eyes, I might never open them again, only... well... dawn came after all.” He managed a wan smile. “I may be craven, but I’m not *stupid*. I’m sore and my back aches from riding and from sleeping on the ground, but I’m hardly scared at all. Look.” He held out a hand for Jon to see how steady it was. “I’ve been working on my maps.”

The world is strange, Jon thought. Two hundred brave men had left the Wall, and the only one who was not growing more fearful was Sam, the self-confessed coward. “We’ll make a ranger of you yet,” he joked. “Next thing, you’ll want to be an outrider like Grenn. Shall I speak to the Old Bear?”

“Don’t you dare!” Sam pulled up the hood of his enormous black cloak and clambered awkwardly back onto his horse. It was a plow horse, big and slow and clumsy, but better able to bear his weight than the little garrons the rangers rode. “I had hoped we might stay the night in the village,” he said wistfully. “It would be nice to sleep under a roof again.”

“Too few roofs for all of us.” Jon mounted again, gave Sam a parting smile, and rode off. The column was well under way, so he swung wide around the village to avoid the worst of the congestion. He had seen enough of Whitetree.

Ghost emerged from the undergrowth so suddenly that the garron shied and reared. The white wolf hunted well away from the line of march, but he was not having much better fortune than the foragers Smallwood sent out after game. The woods were as empty as the villages, Dywen had told him one night around the fire. “We’re a large party,” Jon had said. “The game’s probably been frightened away by all the noise we make on the march.”

“Frightened away by *something*, no doubt,” Dywen said.

Once the horse had settled, Ghost loped along easily beside him. Jon caught up to Mormont as he was wending his way around a hawthorn thicket. “Is the bird away?” the Old Bear asked.

“Yes, my lord. Sam is teaching them to talk.”

The Old Bear snorted. “He’ll regret that. Damned things make a lot of noise, but they never say a thing worth hearing.”

They rode in silence, until Jon said, “If my uncle found all these villages empty as well—”

“—he would have made it his purpose to learn why,” Lord Mormont finished for him, “and it may well be someone or something did not want that known. Well, we’ll be three hundred when Qhorin joins us. Whatever enemy waits out here will not find us so easy to deal with. We will find them, Jon, I promise you.”

Or they will find us, thought Jon.