

JON

The mare whickered softly as Jon Snow tightened the cinch. “Easy, sweet lady,” he said in a soft voice, quieting her with a touch. Wind whispered through the stable, a cold dead breath on his face, but Jon paid it no mind. He strapped his roll to the saddle, his scarred fingers stiff and clumsy. “Ghost,” he called softly, “to me.” And the wolf was there, eyes like embers.

“Jon, please. You must not do this.”

He mounted, the reins in his hand, and wheeled the horse around to face the night. Samwell Tarly stood in the stable door, a full moon peering over his shoulder. He threw a giant’s shadow, immense and black. “Get out of my way, Sam.”

“Jon, you *can*’t,” Sam said. “I won’t let you.”

“I would sooner not hurt you,” Jon told him. “Move aside, Sam, or I’ll ride you down.”

“You won’t. You have to listen to me. Please...”

Jon put his spurs to horseflesh, and the mare bolted for the door. For an instant Sam stood his ground, his face as round and pale as the moon behind him, his mouth a widening O of surprise. At the last moment, when they were almost on him, he jumped aside as Jon had known he would, stumbled, and fell. The mare leapt over him, out into the night.

Jon raised the hood of his heavy cloak and gave the horse her head. Castle Black was silent and still as he rode out, with Ghost racing at his side. Men watched from the Wall behind him, he knew, but their eyes were turned north, not south. No one would see him go, no one but Sam Tarly, struggling back to his feet in the dust of the old stables. He hoped Sam hadn’t hurt himself, falling like that. He was so heavy and so ungainly, it would be just like him to break a wrist or twist his ankle getting out of the way. “I warned him,” Jon said aloud. “It was nothing to do with him, anyway.” He flexed his burned hand as he rode, opening and closing the

scarred fingers. They still pained him, but it felt good to have the wrappings off.

Moonlight silvered the hills as he followed the twisting ribbon of the kingsroad. He needed to get as far from the Wall as he could before they realized he was gone. On the morrow he would leave the road and strike out overland through field and bush and stream to throw off pursuit, but for the moment speed was more important than deception. It was not as though they would not guess where he was going.

The Old Bear was accustomed to rise at first light, so Jon had until dawn to put as many leagues as he could between him and the Wall... *if* Sam Tarly did not betray him. The fat boy was dutiful and easily frightened, but he loved Jon like a brother. If questioned, Sam would doubtless tell them the truth, but Jon could not imagine him braving the guards in front of the King's Tower to wake Mormont from sleep.

When Jon did not appear to fetch the Old Bear's breakfast from the kitchen, they'd look in his cell and find Longclaw on the bed. It had been hard to abandon it, but Jon was not so lost to honor as to take it with him. Even Jorah Mormont had not done that, when he fled in disgrace. Doubtless Lord Mormont would find someone more worthy of the blade. Jon felt bad when he thought of the old man. He knew his desertion would be salt in the still-raw wound of his son's disgrace. That seemed a poor way to repay him for his trust, but it couldn't be helped. No matter what he did, Jon felt as though he were betraying someone.

Even now, he did not know if he was doing the honorable thing. The southron had it easier. They had their septons to talk to, someone to tell them the gods' will and help sort out right from wrong. But the Starks worshiped the old gods, the nameless gods, and if the heart trees heard, they did not speak.

When the last lights of Castle Black vanished behind him, Jon slowed his mare to a walk. He had a long journey ahead and only the one horse to see him through. There were holdfasts and farming villages along the road south where he might be able to trade the mare for a fresh mount when he needed one, but not if she were injured or blown.

He would need to find new clothes soon; most like, he'd need to steal them. He was clad in black from head to heel; high leather riding boots, roughspun breeches and tunic, sleeveless leather jerkin, and heavy wool cloak. His longsword and dagger were sheathed in black moleskin, and the hauberk and coif in his saddlebag were black ringmail. Any bit of it could mean his death if he were taken. A stranger wearing black was viewed with cold suspicion in every village and holdfast north of the Neck, and men would soon be watching for him. Once Maester Aemon's ravens took flight, Jon knew he would find no safe haven. Not even at Winterfell. Bran might want to let him in, but Maester Luwin had better sense. He would bar the gates and send Jon away, as he should. Better not to call there at all.

Yet he saw the castle clear in his mind's eye, as if he had left it only yesterday; the towering granite walls, the Great Hall with its smells of smoke and dog and roasting meat, his father's solar, the turret room where he had slept. Part of him wanted nothing so much as to hear Bran laugh again, to sup on one of Gage's beef-and-bacon pies, to listen to Old Nan tell her tales of the children of the forest and Florian the Fool.

But he had not left the Wall for that; he had left because he was after all his father's son, and Robb's brother. The gift of a sword, even a sword as fine as Longclaw, did not make him a Mormont. Nor was he Aemon Targaryen. Three times the old man had chosen, and three times he had chosen honor, but that was him. Even now, Jon could not decide whether the maester had stayed because he was weak and craven, or because he was strong and true. Yet he understood what the old man had meant, about the pain of choosing; he understood that all too well.

Tyrion Lannister had claimed that most men would rather deny a hard truth than face it, but Jon was done with denials. He was who he was; Jon Snow, bastard and oathbreaker, motherless, friendless, and damned. For the rest of his life—however long that might be—he would be condemned to be an outsider, the silent man standing in the shadows who dares not speak his true name. Wherever he might go throughout the Seven Kingdoms, he would need to live a lie, lest every man's hand be raised against him. But it

made no matter, so long as he lived long enough to take his place by his brother's side and help avenge his father.

He remembered Robb as he had last seen him, standing in the yard with snow melting in his auburn hair. Jon would have to come to him in secret, disguised. He tried to imagine the look on Robb's face when he revealed himself. His brother would shake his head and smile, and he'd say... he'd say...

He could not see the smile. Hard as he tried, he could not see it. He found himself thinking of the deserter his father had beheaded the day they'd found the direwolves. "You said the words," Lord Eddard had told him. "You took a vow, before your brothers, before the old gods and the new." Desmond and Fat Tom had dragged the man to the stump. Bran's eyes had been wide as saucers, and Jon had to remind him to keep his pony in hand. He remembered the look on Father's face when Theon Greyjoy brought forth Ice, the spray of blood on the snow, the way Theon had kicked the head when it came rolling at his feet.

He wondered what Lord Eddard might have done if the deserter had been his brother Benjen instead of that ragged stranger. Would it have been any different? It must, surely, *surely*... and Robb would welcome him, for a certainty. He *had* to, or else...

It did not bear thinking about. Pain throbbed, deep in his fingers, as he clutched the reins. Jon put his heels into his horse and broke into a gallop, racing down the kingsroad, as if to outrun his doubts. Jon was not afraid of death, but he did not want to die like that, trussed and bound and beheaded like a common brigand. If he must perish, let it be with a sword in his hand, fighting his father's killers. He was no true Stark, had never been one... but he could die like one. Let them say that Eddard Stark had fathered four sons, not three.

Ghost kept pace with them for almost half a mile, red tongue lolling from his mouth. Man and horse alike lowered their heads as he asked the mare for more speed. The wolf slowed, stopped, watching, his eyes glowing red in the moonlight. He vanished behind, but Jon knew he would follow, at his own pace.

Scattered lights flickered through the trees ahead of him, on both sides of the road: Mole's Town. A dog barked as he rode through, and he heard a mule's raucous haw from the stable, but otherwise the village was still. Here and there the glow of hearth fires shone through shuttered windows, leaking between wooden slats, but only a few.

Mole's Town was bigger than it seemed, but three quarters of it was under the ground, in deep warm cellars connected by a maze of tunnels. Even the whorehouse was down there, nothing on the surface but a wooden shack no bigger than a privy, with a red lantern hung over the door. On the Wall, he'd heard men call the whores "buried treasures." He wondered whether any of his brothers in black were down there tonight, mining. That was oathbreaking too, yet no one seemed to care.

Not until he was well beyond the village did Jon slow again. By then both he and the mare were damp with sweat. He dismounted, shivering, his burned hand aching. A bank of melting snow lay under the trees, bright in the moonlight, water trickling off to form small shallow pools. Jon squatted and brought his hands together, cupping the runoff between his fingers. The snowmelt was icy cold. He drank, and splashed some on his face, until his cheeks tingled. His fingers were throbbing worse than they had in days, and his head was pounding too. *I am doing the right thing*, he told himself, *so why do I feel so bad?*

The horse was well lathered, so Jon took the lead and walked her for a while. The road was scarcely wide enough for two riders to pass abreast, its surface cut by tiny streams and littered with stone. That run had been truly stupid, an invitation to a broken neck. Jon wondered what had gotten into him. Was he in such a great rush to die?

Off in the trees, the distant scream of some frightened animal made him look up. His mare whinnied nervously. Had his wolf found some prey? He cupped his hands around his mouth. "*Ghost!*" he shouted. "Ghost, to me." The only answer was a rush of wings behind him as an owl took flight.

Frowning, Jon continued on his way. He led the mare for half an hour, until she was dry. Ghost did not appear. Jon wanted to mount up and ride again, but he was concerned about his missing wolf. "*Ghost,*" he called

again. “Where are you? To me! *Ghost!*” Nothing in these woods could trouble a direwolf, even a half-grown direwolf, unless... no, Ghost was too smart to attack a bear, and if there was a wolf pack anywhere close Jon would have surely heard them howling.

He should eat, he decided. Food would settle his stomach and give Ghost the chance to catch up. There was no danger yet; Castle Black still slept. In his saddlebag, he found a biscuit, a piece of cheese, and a small withered brown apple. He’d brought salt beef as well, and a rasher of bacon he’d filched from the kitchens, but he would save the meat for the morrow. After it was gone he’d need to hunt, and that would slow him.

Jon sat under the trees and ate his biscuit and cheese while his mare grazed along the kingsroad. He kept the apple for last. It had gone a little soft, but the flesh was still tart and juicy. He was down to the core when he heard the sounds: horses, and from the north. Quickly Jon leapt up and strode to his mare. Could he outrun them? No, they were too close, they’d hear him for a certainty, and if they were from Castle Black...

He led the mare off the road, behind a thick stand of grey-green sentinels. “Quiet now,” he said in a hushed voice, crouching down to peer through the branches. If the gods were kind, the riders would pass by. Likely as not, they were only smallfolk from Mole’s Town, farmers on their way to their fields, although what they were doing out in the middle of the night...

He listened to the sound of hooves growing steadily louder as they trotted briskly down the kingsroad. From the sound, there were five or six of them at the least. Their voices drifted through the trees.

“...certain he came this way?”

“We *can’t* be certain.”

“He could have ridden east, for all you know. Or left the road to cut through the woods. That’s what I’d do.”

“In the dark? Stupid. If you didn’t fall off your horse and break your neck, you’d get lost and wind up back at the Wall when the sun came up.”

"I would not." Grenn sounded peeved. "I'd just ride south, you can tell south by the stars."

"What if the sky was cloudy?" Pyp asked.

"Then I wouldn't go."

Another voice broke in. "You know where I'd be if it was me? I'd be in Mole's Town, digging for buried treasure." Toad's shrill laughter boomed through the trees. Jon's mare snorted.

"Keep quiet, all of you," Haider said. "I thought I heard something."

"Where? I didn't hear anything." The horses stopped.

"*You* can't hear yourself fart."

"I can too," Grenn insisted.

"*Quiet!*"

They all fell silent, listening. Jon found himself holding his breath. *Sam*, he thought. He hadn't gone to the Old Bear, but he hadn't gone to bed either, he'd woken the other boys. Damn them all. Come dawn, if they were not in their beds, they'd be named deserters too. What did they think they were doing?

The hushed silence seemed to stretch on and on. From where Jon crouched, he could see the legs of their horses through the branches. Finally Pyp spoke up. "What did you hear?"

"I don't know," Haider admitted. "A sound, I thought it might have been a horse but..."

"There's nothing here."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jon glimpsed a pale shape moving through the trees. Leaves rustled, and Ghost came bounding out of the shadows, so suddenly that Jon's mare started and gave a whinny. "*There!*" Halder shouted.

"I heard it too!"

"Traitor," Jon told the direwolf as he swung up into the saddle. He turned the mare's head to slide off through the trees, but they were on him before he had gone ten feet.

“Jon!” Pyp shouted after him.

“Pull up,” Grenn said. “You can’t outrun us all.”

Jon wheeled around to face them, drawing his sword. “Get back. I don’t wish to hurt you, but I will if I have to.”

“One against seven?” Halder gave a signal. The boys spread out, surrounding him.

“What do you want with me?” Jon demanded.

“We want to take you back where you belong,” Pyp said.

“I belong with my brother.”

“*We’re* your brothers now,” Grenn said.

“They’ll cut off your head if they catch you, you know,” Toad put in with a nervous laugh. “This is so stupid, it’s like something the Aurochs would do.”

“I would not,” Grenn said. “I’m no oathbreaker. I said the words and I meant them.”

“So did I,” Jon told them. “Don’t you understand? They murdered my *father*. It’s war, my brother Robb is fighting in the riverlands—”

“We know,” said Pyp solemnly. “Sam told us everything.”

“We’re sorry about your father,” Grenn said, “but it doesn’t matter. Once you say the words, you can’t leave, no matter what.”

“I *have* to,” Jon said fervently.

“You said the words,” Pyp reminded him. “*Now my watch begins*, you said it. *It shall not end until my death*.”

“*I shall live and die at my post*,” Grenn added, nodding.

“You don’t have to tell me the words, I know them as well as you do.” He was angry now. Why couldn’t they let him go in peace? They were only making it harder.

“*I am the sword in the darkness*,” Halder intoned.

“*The watcher on the walls*,” piped Toad.

Jon cursed them all to their faces. They took no notice. Pyp spurred his horse closer, reciting, *“I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men.”*

“Stay back,” Jon warned him, brandishing his sword. “I mean it, Pyp.” They weren’t even wearing armor, he could cut them to pieces if he had to.

Matthar had circled behind him. He joined the chorus. *“I pledge my life and honor to the Night’s Watch.”*

Jon kicked his mare, spinning her in a circle. The boys were all around him now, closing from every side.

“For this night...” Halder trotted in from the left.

“...and all the nights to come,” finished Pyp. He reached over for Jon’s reins. “So here are your choices. Kill me, or come back with me.”

Jon lifted his sword... and lowered it, helpless. “Damn you,” he said. “Damn you all.”

“Do we have to bind your hands, or will you give us your word you’ll ride back peaceful?” asked Halder.

“I won’t run, if that’s what you mean.” Ghost moved out from under the trees and Jon glared at him. “Small help you were,” he said. The deep red eyes looked at him knowingly.

“We had best hurry,” Pyp said. “If we’re not back before first light, the Old Bear will have *all* our heads.”

Of the ride back, Jon Snow remembered little. It seemed shorter than the journey south, perhaps because his mind was elsewhere. Pyp set the pace, galloping, walking, trotting, and then breaking into another gallop. Mole’s Town came and went, the red lantern over the brothel long extinguished. They made good time. Dawn was still an hour off when Jon glimpsed the towers of Castle Black ahead of them, dark against the pale immensity of the Wall. It did not seem like home this time.

They could take him back, Jon told himself, but they could not make him stay. The war would not end on the morrow, or the day after, and his friends could not watch him day and night. He would bide his time, make

them think he was content to remain here... and then, when they had grown lax, he would be off again. Next time he would avoid the kingsroad. He could follow the Wall east, perhaps all the way to the sea, a longer route but a safer one. Or even west, to the mountains, and then south over the high passes. That was the wildling's way, hard and perilous, but at least no one would follow him. He wouldn't stray within a hundred leagues of Winterfell or the kingsroad.

Samwell Tarly awaited them in the old stables, slumped on the ground against a bale of hay, too anxious to sleep. He rose and brushed himself off. "I... I'm glad they found you, Jon."

"I'm not," Jon said, dismounting.

Pyp hopped off his horse and looked at the lightening sky with disgust. "Give us a hand bedding down the horses, Sam," the small boy said. "We have a long day before us, and no sleep to face it on, thanks to Lord Snow."

When day broke, Jon walked to the kitchens as he did every dawn. Three-Finger Hobb said nothing as he gave him the Old Bear's breakfast. Today it was three brown eggs boiled hard, with fried bread and ham steak and a bowl of wrinkled plums. Jon carried the food back to the King's Tower. He found Mormont at the window seat, writing. His raven was walking back and forth across his shoulders, muttering, "*Corn, corn, corn.*" The bird shrieked when Jon entered. "Put the food on the table," the Old Bear said, glancing up. "I'll have some beer."

Jon opened a shuttered window, took the flagon of beer off the outside ledge, and filled a horn. Hobb had given him a lemon, still cold from the Wall. Jon crushed it in his fist. The juice trickled through his fingers. Mormont drank lemon in his beer every day, and claimed that was why he still had his own teeth.

"Doubtless you loved your father," Mormont said when Jon brought him his horn. "The things we love destroy us every time, lad. Remember when I told you that?"

"I remember," Jon said sullenly. He did not care to talk of his father's death, not even to Mormont.

“See that you never forget it. The hard truths are the ones to hold tight. Fetch me my plate. Is it ham again? So be it. You look weary. Was your moonlight ride so tiring?”

Jon’s throat was dry. “You know?”

“*Know*,” the raven echoed from Mormont’s shoulder. “*Know*.”

The Old Bear snorted. “Do you think they chose me Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch because I’m dumb as a stump, Snow? Aemon told me you’d go. I told him you’d be back. I know my men... and my *boys* too. Honor set you on the kingsroad... and honor brought you back.”

“My friends brought me back,” Jon said.

“Did I say it was *your* honor?” Mormont inspected his plate.

“They killed my father. Did you expect me to do nothing?”

“If truth be told, we expected you to do just as you did.” Mormont tried a plum, spit out the pit. “I ordered a watch kept over you., You were seen leaving. If your brothers had not fetched you back, you would have been taken along the way, and not by friends. Unless you have a horse with wings like a raven. Do you?”

“No.” Jon felt like a fool.

“Pity, we could use a horse like that.”

Jon stood tall. He told himself that he would die well; that much he could do, at the least. “I know the penalty for desertion, my lord. I’m not afraid to die.”

“*Die!*” the raven cried.

“Nor live, I hope,” Mormont said, cutting his ham with a dagger and feeding a bite to the bird. “You have not deserted—yet. Here you stand. If we beheaded every boy who rode to Mole’s Town in the night, only ghosts would guard the Wall. Yet maybe you mean to flee again on the morrow, or a fortnight from now. Is that it? Is that your hope, boy?”

Jon kept silent.

“I thought so.” Mormont peeled the shell off a boiled egg. “Your father is dead, lad. Do you think you can bring him back?”

“No,” he answered, sullen.

“Good,” Mormont said. “We’ve seen the dead come back, you and me, and it’s not something I care to see again.” He ate the egg in two bites and flicked a bit of shell out from between his teeth. “Your brother is in the field with all the power of the north behind him. Any one of his lords bannermen commands more swords than you’ll find in all the Night’s Watch. Why do you imagine that they need your help? Are you such a mighty warrior, or do you carry a grumkin in your pocket to magic up your sword?”

Jon had no answer for him. The raven was pecking at an egg, breaking the shell. Pushing his beak through the hole, he pulled out morsels of white and yoke.

The Old Bear sighed. “You are not the only one touched by this war. Like as not, my sister is marching in your brother’s host, her and those daughters of hers, dressed in men’s mail. Maege is a hoary old snark, stubborn, short-tempered, and willful. Truth be told, I can hardly stand to be around the wretched woman, but that does not mean my love for her is any less than the love you bear your half sisters.” Frowning, Mormont took his last egg and squeezed it in his fist until the shell crunched. “Or perhaps it does. Be that as it may, I’d still grieve if she were slain, yet you don’t see me running off. I said the words, just as you did. My place is here... where is yours, boy?”

I have no place, Jon wanted to say, I’m a bastard, I have no rights, no name, no mother, and now not even a father. The words would not come. “I don’t know.”

“I do,” said Lord Commander Mormont. “The cold winds are rising, Snow. Beyond the Wall, the shadows lengthen. Cotter Pyke writes of vast herds of elk, streaming south and east toward the sea, and mammoths as well. He says one of his men discovered huge, misshapen footprints not three leagues from Eastwatch. Rangers from the Shadow Tower have found whole villages abandoned, and at night Ser Denys says they see fires in the mountains, huge blazes that burn from dusk till dawn. Quorin Halfhand took a captive in the depths of the Gorge, and the man swears that Mance Rayder is massing all his people in some new, secret stronghold he’s found,

to what end the gods only know. Do you think your uncle Benjen was the only ranger we've lost this past year?"

"*Ben Jen*," the raven squawked, bobbing its head, bits of egg dribbling from its beak. "*Ben Jen. Ben Jen.*"

"No," Jon said. There had been others. Too many.

"Do you think your brother's war is more important than ours?" the old man barked.

Jon chewed his lip. The raven flapped its wings at him. "*War, war, war, war,*" it sang.

"It's not," Mormont told him. "Gods save us, boy, you're not blind and you're not stupid. When dead men come hunting in the night, do you think it matters who sits the Iron Throne?"

"No." Jon had not thought of it that way.

"Your lord father sent you to us, Jon. Why, who can say?"

"*Why? Why? Why?*" the raven called.

"All I know is that the blood of the First Men flows in the veins of the Starks. The First Men built the Wall, and it's said they remember things otherwise forgotten. And that beast of yours... he led us to the wights, warned you of the dead man on the steps. Ser Jaremy would doubtless call that happenstance, yet Ser Jaremy is dead and I'm not." Lord Mormont stabbed a chunk of ham with the point of his dagger. "I think you were meant to be here, and I want you and that wolf of yours with us when we go beyond the Wall."

His words sent a chill of excitement down Jon's back. "Beyond the Wall?"

"You heard me. I mean to find Ben Stark, alive or dead." He chewed and swallowed. "I will not sit here meekly and wait for the snows and the ice winds. We must know what is happening. This time the Night's Watch will ride in force, against the King-beyond-the-Wall, the Others, and anything else that may be out there. I mean to command them myself." He pointed his dagger at Jon's chest. "By custom, the Lord Commander's steward is his squire as well... but I do not care to wake every dawn

wondering if you've run off again. So I will have an answer from you, Lord Snow, and I will have it now. Are you a brother of the Night's Watch... or only a bastard boy who wants to play at war?"

Jon Snow straightened himself and took a long deep breath. *Forgive me, Father. Robb, Arya, Bran... forgive me, I cannot help you. He has the truth of it. This is my place.* "I am... yours, my lord. Your man. I swear it. I will not run again."

The Old Bear snorted. "Good. Now go put on your sword."