

JON

“Are you well, Snow?” Lord Mormont asked, scowling.

“*Well*,” his raven squawked. “*Well*.”

“I am, my lord,” Jon lied... loudly, as if that could make it true. “And you?”

Mormont frowned. “A dead man tried to kill me. How well could I be?” He scratched under his chin. His shaggy grey beard had been singed in the fire, and he’d hacked it off. The pale stubble of his new whiskers made him look old, disreputable, and grumpy. “You do not look well. How is your hand?”

“Healing.” Jon flexed his bandaged fingers to show him. He had burned himself more badly than he knew throwing the flaming drapes, and his right hand was swathed in silk halfway to the elbow. At the time he’d felt nothing; the agony had come after. His cracked red skin oozed fluid, and fearsome blood blisters rose between his fingers, big as roaches. “The maester says I’ll have scars, but otherwise the hand should be as good as it was before.”

“A scarred hand is nothing. On the Wall, you’ll be wearing gloves often as not.”

“As you say, my lord.” It was not the thought of scars that troubled Jon; it was the rest of it. Maester Aemon had given him milk of the poppy, yet even so, the pain had been hideous. At first it had felt as if his hand were still aflame, burning day and night. Only plunging it into basins of snow and shaved ice gave any relief at all. Jon thanked the gods that no one but Ghost saw him writhing on his bed, whimpering from the pain. And when at last he did sleep, he dreamt, and that was even worse. In the dream, the corpse he fought had blue eyes, black hands, and his father’s face, but he dared not tell Mormont *that*.

“Dywen and Hake returned last night,” the Old Bear said. “They found no sign of your uncle, no more than the others did.”

“I know.” Jon had dragged himself to the common hall to sup with his friends, and the failure of the rangers’ search had been all the men had been talking of.

“You know,” Mormont grumbled. “How is it that everyone knows everything around here?” He did not seem to expect an answer. “It would seem there were only the two of... of those *creatures*, whatever they were, I will not call them men. And thank the gods for that. Any more and... well, that doesn’t bear thinking of. There will be more, though. I can feel it in these old bones of mine, and Maester Aemon agrees. The cold winds are rising. Summer is at an end, and a winter is coming such as this world has never seen.”

Winter is coming. The Stark words had never sounded so grim or ominous to Jon as they did now. “My lord,” he asked hesitantly, “it’s said there was a bird last night...”

“There was. What of it?”

“I had hoped for some word of my father.”

“*Father*,” taunted the old raven, bobbing its head as it walked across Mormont’s shoulders. “*Father*.”

The Lord Commander reached up to pinch its beak shut, but the raven hopped up on his head, fluttered its wings, and flew across the chamber to light above a window. “Grief and noise,” Mormont grumbled. “That’s all they’re good for, ravens. Why I put up with that pestilential bird... if there was news of Lord Eddard, don’t you think I would have sent for you? Bastard or no, you’re still his blood. The message concerned Ser Barristan Selmy. It seems he’s been removed from the Kingsguard. They gave his place to that black dog Clegane, and now Selmy’s wanted for treason. The fools sent some watchmen to seize him, but he slew two of them and escaped.” Mormont snorted, leaving no doubt of his view of men who’d send gold cloaks against a knight as renowned as Barristan the Bold. “We have white shadows in the woods and unquiet dead stalking our halls, and a boy sits the Iron Throne,” he said in disgust.

The raven laughed shrilly. “*Boy, boy, boy, boy.*”

Ser Barristan had been the Old Bear's best hope, Jon remembered; if he had fallen, what chance was there that Mormont's letter would be heeded? He curled his hand into a fist. Pain shot through his burned fingers. "What of my sisters?"

"The message made no mention of Lord Eddard or the girls." He gave an irritated shrug. "Perhaps they never got my letter. Aemon sent two copies, with his best birds, but who can say? More like, Pycelle did not deign to reply. It would not be the first time, nor the last. I fear we count for less than nothing in King's Landing. They tell us what they want us to know, and that's little enough."

And you tell me what you want me to know, and that's less, Jon thought resentfully. His brother Robb had called the banners and ridden south to war, yet no word of that had been breathed to him... save by Samwell Tarly, who'd read the letter to Maester Aemon and whispered its contents to Jon that night in secret, all the time saying how he shouldn't. Doubtless they thought his brother's war was none of his concern. It troubled him more than he could say. Robb was marching and he was not. No matter how often Jon told himself that his place was here now, with his new brothers on the Wall, he still felt craven.

"*Corn,*" the raven was crying. "*Corn, corn.*"

"Oh, be quiet," the Old Bear told it. "Snow, how soon does Maester Aemon say you'll have use of that hand back?"

"Soon," Jon replied.

"Good." On the table between them, Lord Mormont laid a large sword in a black metal scabbard banded with silver. "Here. You'll be ready for this, then."

The raven flapped down and landed on the table, strutting toward the sword, head cocked curiously. Jon hesitated. He had no inkling what this meant. "My lord?"

"The fire melted the silver off the pommel and burnt the crossguard and grip. Well, dry leather and old wood, what could you expect? The blade, now... you'd need a fire a hundred times as hot to harm the blade."

Mormont shoved the scabbard across the rough oak planks. “I had the rest made anew. Take it.”

“*Take it,*” echoed his raven, preening. “*Take it, take it.*”

Awkwardly, Jon took the sword in hand. His *left* hand; his bandaged right was still too raw and clumsy. Carefully he pulled it from its scabbard and raised it level with his eyes.

The pommel was a hunk of pale stone weighted with lead to balance the long blade. It had been carved into the likeness of a snarling wolf’s head, with chips of garnet set into the eyes. The grip was virgin leather, soft and black, as yet unstained by sweat or blood. The blade itself was a good half foot longer than those Jon was used to, tapered to thrust as well as slash, with three fullers deeply incised in the metal. Where Ice was a true two-handed greatsword, this was a hand-and-a-half, sometimes named a “bastard sword.” Yet the wolf sword actually seemed lighter than the blades he had wielded before. When Jon turned it sideways, he could see the ripples in the dark steel where the metal had been folded back on itself again and again. “This is Valyrian steel, my lord,” he said wonderingly. His father had let him handle Ice often enough; he knew the look, the feel.

“It is,” the Old Bear told him. “It was my father’s sword, and his father’s before him. The Mormonts have carried it for five centuries. I wielded it in my day and passed it on to my son when I took the black.”

He is giving me his son’s sword. Jon could scarcely believe it. The blade was exquisitely balanced. The edges glimmered faintly as they kissed the light. “Your son—”

“My son brought dishonor to House Mormont, but at least he had the grace to leave the sword behind when he fled. My sister returned it to my keeping, but the very sight of it reminded me of Jorah’s shame, so I put it aside and thought no more of it until we found it in the ashes of my bedchamber. The original pommel was a bear’s head, silver, yet so worn its features were all but indistinguishable. For you, I thought a white wolf more apt. One of our builders is a fair stonecarver.”

When Jon had been Bran’s age, he had dreamed of doing great deeds, as boys always did. The details of his feats changed with every dreaming,

but quite often he imagined saving his father's life. Afterward Lord Eddard would declare that Jon had proved himself a true Stark, and place Ice in his hand. Even then he had known it was only a child's folly; no bastard could ever hope to wield a father's sword. Even the memory shamed him. What kind of man stole his own brother's birthright? *I have no right to this, he thought, no more than to Ice.* He twitched his burned fingers, feeling a throb of pain deep under the skin. "My lord, you honor me, but—"

"Spare me your *but's*, boy," Lord Mormont interrupted. "I would not be sitting here were it not for you and that beast of yours. You fought bravely... and more to the point, you thought quickly. *Fire!* Yes, damn it. We ought to have known. We ought to have *remembered*. The Long Night has come before. Oh, eight thousand years is a good while, to be sure... yet if the Night's Watch does not remember, who will?"

"*Who will,*" chimed the talkative raven. "*Who will.*"

Truly, the gods had heard Jon's prayer that night; the fire had caught in the dead man's clothing and consumed him as if his flesh were candle wax and his bones old dry wood. Jon had only to close his eyes to see the thing staggering across the solar, crashing against the furniture and flailing at the flames. It was the face that haunted him most; surrounded by a nimbus of fire, hair blazing like straw, the dead flesh melting away and sloughing off its skull to reveal the gleam of bone beneath.

Whatever demonic force moved Othor had been driven out by the flames; the twisted thing they had found in the ashes had been no more than cooked meat and charred bone. Yet in his nightmare he faced it again... and this time the burning corpse wore Lord Eddard's features. It was his father's skin that burst and blackened, his father's eyes that ran liquid down his cheeks like jellied tears. Jon did not understand why that should be or what it might mean, but it frightened him more than he could say.

"A sword's small payment for a life," Mormont concluded. "Take it, I'll hear no more of it, is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord." The soft leather gave beneath Jon's fingers, as if the sword were molding itself to his grip already. He knew he should be honored, and he was, and yet...

He is not my father. The thought leapt unbidden to Jon's mind. *Lord Eddard Stark is my father. I will not forget him, no matter how many swords they give me.* Yet he could scarcely tell Lord Mormont that it was another man's sword he dreamt of...

"I want no courtesies either," Mormont said, "so thank me no thanks. Honor the steel with deeds, not words."

Jon nodded. "Does it have a name, my lord?"

"It did, once. Longclaw, it was called."

"*Claw*," the raven cried. "*Claw*."

"Longclaw is an apt name." Jon tried a practice cut. He was clumsy and uncomfortable with his left hand, yet even so the steel seemed to flow through the air, as if it had a will of its own. "Wolves have claws, as much as bears."

The Old Bear seemed pleased by that. "I suppose they do. You'll want to wear that over the shoulder, I imagine. It's too long for the hip, at least until you've put on a few inches. And you'll need to work at your two-handed strikes as well. Ser Endrew can show you some moves, when your burns have healed."

"Ser Endrew?" Jon did not know the name.

"Ser Endrew Tarth, a good man. He's on his way from the Shadow Tower to assume the duties of master-at-arms. Ser Alliser Thorne left yestermorn for Eastwatch-by-the-Sea."

Jon lowered the sword. "Why?" he said, stupidly.

Mormont snorted. "Because I *sent* him, why do you think? He's bringing the hand your Ghost tore off the end of Jafer Flowers's wrist. I have commanded him to take ship to King's Landing and lay it before this boy king. *That* should get young Joffrey's attention, I'd think... and Ser Alliser's a knight, highborn, anointed, with old friends at court, altogether harder to ignore than a glorified crow."

"*Crow*." Jon thought the raven sounded faintly indignant.

"As well," the Lord Commander continued, ignoring the bird's protest, "it puts a thousand leagues twixt him and you without it seeming a rebuke."

He jabbed a finger up at Jon's face. "And don't think this means I approve of that nonsense in the common hall. Valor makes up for a fair amount of folly, but you're not a boy anymore, however many years you've seen. That's a man's sword you have there, and it will take a man to wield her. I'll expect you to act the part, henceforth."

"Yes, my lord." Jon slid the sword back into the silver-banded scabbard. If not the blade he would have chosen, it was nonetheless a noble gift, and freeing him from Alliser Thorne's malignance was nobler still.

The Old Bear scratched at his chin. "I had forgotten how much a new beard itches," he said. "Well, no help for that. Is that hand of yours healed enough to resume your duties?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. The night will be cold, I'll want hot spice wine. Find me a flagon of red, not too sour, and don't skimp on the spices. And tell Hobb that if he sends me boiled mutton again I'm like to boil *him*. That last haunch was grey. Even the bird wouldn't touch it." He stroked the raven's head with his thumb, and the bird made a contented *quorking* sound. "Away with you. I've work to do."

The guards smiled at him from their niches as he wound his way down the turret stair, carrying the sword in his good hand. "Sweet steel," one man said. "You earned that, Snow," another told him. Jon made himself smile back at them, but his heart was not in it. He knew he should be pleased, yet he did not feel it. His hand ached, and the taste of anger was in his mouth, though he could not have said who he was angry with or why.

A half dozen of his friends were lurking outside when he left the King's Tower, where Lord Commander Mormont now made his residence. They'd hung a target on the granary doors, so they could seem to be honing their skills as archers, but he knew lurkers when he saw them. No sooner did he emerge than Pyp called out, "Well, come about, let's have a look."

"At what?" Jon said.

Toad sidled close. "Your rosy butt cheeks, what else?"

"The sword," Grenn stated. "We want to see the sword."

Jon raked them with an accusing look. "You knew."

Pyp grinned. "We're not all as dumb as Grenn."

"You are so," insisted Grenn. "You're dumber."

Halder gave an apologetic shrug. "I helped Pate carve the stone for the pommel," the builder said, "and your friend Sam bought the garnets in Mole's Town."

"We knew even before that, though," Grenn said. "Rudge has been helping Donal Noye in the forge. He was there when the Old Bear brought him the burnt blade."

"The *sword*!" Matt insisted. The others took up the chant. "The *sword*, the *sword*, the *sword*."

Jon unsheathed Longclaw and showed it to them, turning it this way and that so they could admire it. The bastard blade glittered in the pale sunlight, dark and deadly. "Valyrian steel," he declared solemnly, trying to sound as pleased and proud as he ought to have felt.

"I heard of a man who had a razor made of Valyrian steel," declared Toad. "He cut his head off trying to shave."

Pyp grinned. "The Night's Watch is thousands of years old," he said, "but I'll wager Lord Snow's the first brother ever honored for burning down the Lord Commander's Tower."

The others laughed, and even Jon had to smile. The fire he'd started had not, in truth, burned down that formidable stone tower, but it had done a fair job of gutting the interior of the top two floors, where the Old Bear had his chambers. No one seemed to mind that very much, since it had also destroyed Othor's murderous corpse.

The other wight, the one-handed thing that had once been a ranger named Jafer Flowers, had also been destroyed, cut near to pieces by a dozen swords... but not before it had slain Ser Jaremy Rykker and four other men. Ser Jaremy had finished the job of hacking its head off, yet had died all the same when the headless corpse pulled his own dagger from its sheath and buried it in his bowels. Strength and courage did not avail much against

foemen who would not fall because they were already dead; even arms and armor offered small protection.

That grim thought soured Jon's fragile mood. "I need to see Hobb about the Old Bear's supper," he announced brusquely, sliding Longclaw back into its scabbard. His friends meant well, but they did not understand. It was not their fault, truly; they had not had to face Othor, they had not seen the pale glow of those dead blue eyes, had not felt the cold of those dead black fingers. Nor did they know of the fighting in the riverlands. How could they hope to comprehend? He turned away from them abruptly and strode off, sullen. Pyp called after him, but Jon paid him no mind.

They had moved him back to his old cell in tumbledown Hardin's Tower after the fire, and it was there he returned. Ghost was curled up asleep beside the door, but he lifted his head at the sound of Jon's boots. The direwolf's red eyes were darker than garnets and wiser than men. Jon knelt, scratched his ear, and showed him the pommel of the sword. "Look. It's you."

Ghost sniffed at his carved stone likeness and tried a lick. Jon smiled. "You're the one deserves an honor," he told the wolf... and suddenly he found himself remembering how he'd found him, that day in the late summer snow. They had been riding off with the other pups, but Jon had heard a noise and turned back, and there he was, white fur almost invisible against the drifts. *He was all alone*, he thought, *apart from the others in the litter. He was different, so they drove him out.*

"Jon?" He looked up. Samwell Tarly stood rocking nervously on his heels. His cheeks were red, and he was wrapped in a heavy fur cloak that made him look ready for hibernation.

"Sam." Jon stood. "What is it? Do you want to see the sword?" If the others had known, no doubt Sam did too.

The fat boy shook his head. "I was heir to my father's blade once," he said mournfully. "Heartsbane. Lord Randyll let me hold it a few times, but it always scared me. It was Valyrian steel, beautiful but so sharp I was afraid I'd hurt one of my sisters. Dickon will have it now." He wiped sweaty hands on his cloak. "I ah... Maester Aemon wants to see you."

It was not time for his bandages to be changed. Jon frowned suspiciously. “Why?” he demanded. Sam looked miserable. That was answer enough. “You told him, didn’t you?” Jon said angrily. “You told him that you told me.”

“I... he... Jon, I didn’t want to... he asked... I mean I think he *knew*, he sees things no one else sees...”

“He’s *blind*,” Jon pointed out forcefully, disgusted. “I can find the way myself.” He left Sam standing there, openmouthed and quivering.

He found Maester Aemon up in the rookery, feeding the ravens. Clydas was with him, carrying a bucket of chopped meat as they shuffled from cage to cage. “Sam said you wanted me?”

The maester nodded. “I did indeed. Clydas, give Jon the bucket. Perhaps he will be kind enough to assist me.” The hunched, pink-eyed brother handed Jon the bucket and scurried down the ladder. “Toss the meat into the cages,” Aemon instructed him. “The birds will do the rest.”

Jon shifted the bucket to his right hand and thrust his left down into the bloody bits. The ravens began to scream noisily and fly at the bars, beating at the metal with night-black wings. The meat had been chopped into pieces no larger than a finger joint. He filled his fist and tossed the raw red morsels into the cage, and the squawking and squabbling grew hotter. Feathers flew as two of the larger birds fought over a choice piece. Quickly Jon grabbed a second handful and threw it in after the first. “Lord Mormont’s raven likes fruit and corn.”

“He is a rare bird,” the maester said. “Most ravens will eat grain, but they prefer flesh. It makes them strong, and I fear they relish the taste of blood. In that they are like men... and like men, not all ravens are alike.”

Jon had nothing to say to that. He threw meat, wondering why he’d been summoned. No doubt the old man would tell him, in his own good time. Maester Aemon was not a man to be hurried.

“Doves and pigeons can also be trained to carry messages,” the maester went on, “though the raven is a stronger flyer, larger, bolder, far more clever, better able to defend itself against hawks... yet ravens are black, and

they eat the dead, so some godly men abhor them. Baelor the Blessed tried to replace all the ravens with doves, did you know?" The maester turned his white eyes on Jon, smiling. "The Night's Watch prefers ravens."

Jon's fingers were in the bucket, blood up to the wrist. "Dywen says the wildlings call us crows," he said uncertainty.

"The crow is the raven's poor cousin. They are both beggars in black, hated and misunderstood."

Jon wished he understood what they were talking about, and why. What did he care about ravens and doves? If the old man had something to say to him, why couldn't he just say it?

"Jon, did you ever wonder *why* the men of the Night's Watch take no wives and father no children?" Maester Aemon asked.

Jon shrugged. "No." He scattered more meat. The fingers of his left hand were slimy with blood, and his right throbbed from the weight of the bucket.

"So they will not love," the old man answered, "for love is the bane of honor, the death of duty."

That did not sound right to Jon, yet he said nothing. The maester was a hundred years old, and a high officer of the Night's Watch; it was not his place to contradict him.

The old man seemed to sense his doubts. "Tell me, Jon, if the day should ever come when your lord father must needs choose between honor on the one hand and those he loves on the other, what would he do?"

Jon hesitated. He wanted to say that Lord Eddard would never dishonor himself, not even for love, yet inside a small sly voice whispered, *He fathered a bastard, where was the honor in that? And your mother, what of his duty to her, he will not even say her name.* "He would do whatever was right," he said... ringingly, to make up for his hesitation. "No matter what."

"Then Lord Eddard is a man in ten thousand. Most of us are not so strong. What is honor compared to a woman's love? What is duty against the feel of a newborn son in your arms... or the memory of a brother's

smile? Wind and words. Wind and words. We are only human, and the gods have fashioned us for love. That is our great glory, and our great tragedy.

“The men who formed the Night’s Watch knew that only their courage shielded the realm from the darkness to the north. They knew they must have no divided loyalties to weaken their resolve. So they vowed they would have no wives nor children.

“Yet brothers they had, and sisters. Mothers who gave them birth, fathers who gave them names. They came from a hundred quarrelsome kingdoms, and they knew times may change, but men do not. So they pledged as well that the Night’s Watch would take no part in the battles of the realms it guarded.

“They kept their pledge. When Aegon slew Black Harren and claimed his kingdom, Harren’s brother was Lord Commander on the Wall, with ten thousand swords to hand. He did not march. In the days when the Seven Kingdoms *were* seven kingdoms, not a generation passed that three or four of them were not at war. The Watch took no part. When the Andals crossed the narrow sea and swept away the kingdoms of the First Men, the sons of the fallen kings held true to their vows and remained at their posts. So it has always been, for years beyond counting. Such is the price of honor.

“A craven can be as brave as any man, when there is nothing to fear. And we all do our duty, when there is no cost to it. How easy it seems then, to walk the path of honor. Yet soon or late in every man’s life comes a day when it is *not* easy, a day when he must choose.”

Some of the ravens were still eating, long stringy bits of meat dangling from their beaks. The rest seemed to be watching him. Jon could feel the weight of all those tiny black eyes. “And this is my day... is that what you’re saying?”

Maester Aemon turned his head and *looked* at him with those dead white eyes. It was as if he were seeing right into his heart. Jon felt naked and exposed. He took the bucket in both hands and flung the rest of the slops through the bars. Strings of meat and blood flew everywhere, scattering the ravens. They took to the air, shrieking wildly. The quicker

birds snatched morsels on the wing and gulped them down greedily. Jon let the empty bucket clang to the floor.

The old man laid a withered, spotted hand on his shoulder. “It hurts, boy,” he said softly. “Oh, yes. Choosing... it has always hurt. And always will. I know.”

“You *don't* know,” Jon said bitterly. “No one knows. Even if I am his bastard, he’s still my *father*...”

Maester Aemon sighed. “Have you heard nothing I’ve told you, Jon? Do you think you are the first?” He shook his ancient head, a gesture weary beyond words. “Three times the gods saw fit to test my vows. Once when I was a boy, once in the fullness of my manhood, and once when I had grown old. By then my strength was fled, my eyes grown dim, yet that last choice was as cruel as the first. My ravens would bring the news from the south, words darker than their wings, the ruin of my House, the death of my kin, disgrace and desolation. What could I have done, old, blind, frail? I was helpless as a suckling babe, yet still it grieved me to sit forgotten as they cut down my brother’s poor grandson, and *his* son, and even the little children...”

Jon was shocked to see the shine of tears in the old man’s eyes. “Who are you?” he asked quietly, almost in dread.

A toothless smile quivered on the ancient lips. “Only a maester of the Citadel, bound in service to Castle Black and the Night’s Watch. In my order, we put aside our house names when we take our vows and don the collar.” The old man touched the maester’s chain that hung loosely around his thin, fleshless neck. “My father was Maekar, the First of his Name, and my brother Aegon reigned after him in my stead. My grandfather named me for Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, who was his uncle, or his father, depending on which tale you believe. Aemon, he called me...”

“Aemon... *Targaryen*?” Jon could scarcely believe it.

“Once,” the old man said. “Once. So you see, Jon, I do know... and knowing, I will not tell you *stay* or *go*. You must make that choice yourself, and live with it all the rest of your days. As I have.” His voice fell to a whisper. “As I have...”