

JON

“Sam?” Jon called softly.

The air smelled of paper and dust and years. Before him, tall wooden shelves rose up into dimness, crammed with leatherbound books and bins of ancient scrolls. A faint yellow glow filtered through the stacks from some hidden lamp. Jon blew out the taper he carried, preferring not to risk an open flame amidst so much old dry paper. Instead he followed the light, wending his way down the narrow aisles beneath barrel-vaulted ceilings. All in black, he was a shadow among shadows, dark of hair, long of face, grey of eye. Black moleskin gloves covered his hands; the right because it was burned, the left because a man felt half a fool wearing only one glove.

Samwell Tarly sat hunched over a table in a niche carved into the stone of the wall. The glow came from the lamp hung over his head. He looked up at the sound of Jon’s steps.

“Have you been here all night?”

“Have I?” Sam looked startled.

“You didn’t break your fast with us, and your bed hadn’t been slept in.” Rast suggested that maybe Sam had deserted, but Jon never believed it. Desertion required its own sort of courage, and Sam had little enough of that.

“Is it morning? Down here there’s no way to know.”

“Sam, you’re a sweet fool,” Jon said. “You’ll miss that bed when we’re sleeping on the cold hard ground, I promise you.”

Sam yawned. “Maester Aemon sent me to find maps for the Lord Commander. I never thought... Jon, the *books*, have you ever seen their like? There are *thousands*!”

He gazed about him. “The library at Winterfell has more than a hundred. Did you find the maps?”

“Oh, yes.” Sam’s hand swept over the table, fingers plump as sausages indicating the clutter of books and scrolls before him. “A dozen, at the least.” He unfolded a square of parchment. “The paint has faded, but you can see where the mapmaker marked the sites of wildling villages, and there’s another book... where is it now? I was reading it a moment ago.” He shoved some scrolls aside to reveal a dusty volume bound in rotted leather. “*This*,” he said reverently, “is the account of a journey from the Shadow Tower all the way to Lorn Point on the Frozen Shore, written by a ranger named Redwyn. It’s not dated, but he mentions a Dorren Stark as King in the North, so it must be from before the Conquest. Jon, they fought *giants*! Redwyn even traded with the children of the forest, it’s all here.” Ever so delicately, he turned pages with a finger. “He drew maps as well, see...”

“Maybe you could write an account of our ranging, Sam.”

He’d meant to sound encouraging, but it was the wrong thing to say. The last thing Sam needed was to be reminded of what faced them on the morrow. He shuffled the scrolls about aimlessly. “There’s more maps. If I had time to search... everything’s a jumble. I could set it all to order, though; I know I could, but it would take time... well, *years*, in truth.”

“Mormont wanted those maps a little sooner than that.” Jon plucked a scroll from a bin, blew off the worst of the dust. A corner flaked off between his fingers as he unrolled it. “Look, this one is crumbling,” he said, frowning over the faded script.

“Be gentle.” Sam came around the table and took the scroll from his hand, holding it as if it were a wounded animal. “The important books used to be copied over when they needed them. Some of the oldest have been copied half a hundred times, probably.”

“Well, don’t bother copying that one. Twenty-three barrels of pickled cod, eighteen jars of fish oil, a cask of salt...”

“An inventory,” Sam said, “or perhaps a bill of sale.”

“Who cares how much pickled cod they ate six hundred years ago?” Jon wondered.

“I would.” Sam carefully replaced the scroll in the bin from which Jon had plucked it. “You can learn so much from ledgers like that, truly you can. it can tell you how many men were in the Night’s Watch then, how they lived, what they ate...”

“They ate food,” said Jon, “and they lived as we live.”

“You’d be surprised. This vault is a treasure, Jon.”

“If you say so.” Jon was doubtful. Treasure meant gold, silver, and jewels, not dust, spiders, and rotting leather.

“I do,” the fat boy blurted. He was older than Jon, a man grown by law, but it was hard to think of him as anything but a boy. “I found drawings of the faces in the trees, and a book about the tongue of the children of the forest... works that even the Citadel doesn’t have, scrolls from old Valyria, counts of the seasons written by maesters dead a thousand years...”

“The books will still be here when we return.”

“*If* we return...”

“The Old Bear is taking two hundred seasoned men, three-quarters of them rangers. Qhorin Halfhand will be bringing another hundred brothers from the Shadow Tower. You’ll be as safe as if you were back in your lord father’s castle at Horn Hill.”

Samwell Tarly managed a sad little smile. “I was never very safe in my father’s castle either.”

The gods play cruel jests, Jon thought. Pyp and Toad, all a lather to be a part of the great ranging, were to remain at Castle Black. It was Samwell Tarly, the self-proclaimed coward, grossly fat, timid, and near as bad a rider as he was with a sword, who must face the haunted forest. The Old Bear was taking two cages of ravens, so they might send back word as they went. Maester Aemon was blind and far too frail to ride with them, so his steward must go in his place. “We need you for the ravens, Sam. And someone has to help me keep Grenn humble.”

Sam’s chins quivered. “You could care for the ravens, or Grenn could, or *anyone*,” he said with a thin edge of desperation in his voice. “I could

show you how. You know your letters too, you could write down Lord Mormont's messages as well as I."

"I'm the Old Bear's steward. I'll need to squire for him, tend his horse, set up his tent; I won't have time to watch over birds as well. Sam, you said the words. You're a brother of the Night's Watch now."

"A brother of the Night's Watch shouldn't be so scared."

"We're all scared. We'd be fools if we weren't." Too many rangers had been lost the past two years, even Benjen Stark, Jon's uncle. They had found two of his uncle's men in the wood, slain, but the corpses had risen in the chill of night. Jon's burnt fingers twitched as he remembered. He still saw the wight in his dreams, dead Othor with the burning blue eyes and the cold black hands, but that was the last thing Sam needed to be reminded of. "There's no shame in fear, my father told me, what matters is how we face it. Come, I'll help you gather up the maps."

Sam nodded unhappily. The shelves were so closely spaced that they had to walk single file as they left. The vault opened onto one of the tunnels the brothers called the wormwalks, winding subterranean passages that linked the keeps and towers of Castle Black under the earth. In summer the wormwalks were seldom used, save by rats and other vermin, but winter was a different matter. When the snows drifted forty and fifty feet high and the ice winds came howling out of the north, the tunnels were all that held Castle Black together.

Soon, Jon thought as they climbed. He'd seen the harbinger that had come to Maester Aemon with word of summer's end, the great raven of the Citadel, white and silent as Ghost. He had seen a winter once, when he was very young, but everyone agreed that it had been a short one, and mild. This one would be different. He could feel it in his bones.

The steep stone steps had Sam puffing like a blacksmith's bellows by the time they reached the surface. They emerged into a brisk wind that made Jon's cloak swirl and snap. Ghost was stretched out asleep beneath the wattle-and-daub wall of the granary, but he woke when Jon appeared, bushy white tail held stiffly upright as he trotted to them.

Sam squinted up at the Wall. It loomed above them, an icy cliff seven hundred feet high. Sometimes it seemed to Jon almost a living thing, with moods of its own. The color of the ice was wont to change with every shift of the light. Now it was the deep blue of frozen rivers, now the dirty white of old snow, and when a cloud passed before the sun it darkened to the pale grey of pitted stone. The Wall stretched east and west as far as the eye could see, so huge that it shrunk the timbered keeps and stone towers of the castle to insignificance. It was the end of the world.

And we are going beyond it.

The morning sky was streaked by thin grey clouds, but the pale red line was there behind them. The black brothers had dubbed the wanderer Mormont's Torch, saying (only half in jest) that the gods must have sent it to light the old man's way through the haunted forest.

"The comet's so bright you can see it by day now," Sam said, shading his eyes with a fistful of books.

"Never mind about comets, it's maps the Old Bear wants."

Ghost loped ahead of them. The grounds seemed deserted this morning, with so many rangers off at the brothel in Mole's Town, digging for buried treasure and drinking themselves blind. Grenn had gone with them. Pyp and Halder and Toad had offered to buy him his first woman to celebrate his first ranging. They'd wanted Jon and Sam to come as well, but Sam was almost as frightened of whores as he was of the haunted forest, and Jon had wanted no part of it. "Do what you want," he told Toad, "I took a vow."

As they passed the sept, he heard voices raised in song. *Some men want whores on the eve of battle, and some want gods.* Jon wondered who felt better afterward. The sept tempted him no more than the brothel; his own gods kept their temples in the wild places, where the weirwoods spread their bone-white branches. *The Seven have no power beyond the Wall,* he thought, *but my gods will be waiting.*

Outside the armory, Ser Endrew Tarth was working with some raw recruits. They'd come in last night with Conwy, one of the wandering crows who roamed the Seven Kingdoms collecting men for the Wall. This new crop consisted of a greybeard leaning on a staff, two blond boys with the

look of brothers, a foppish youth in soiled satin, a raggy man with a clubfoot, and some grinning loon who must have fancied himself a warrior. Ser Endrew was showing him the error of that presumption. He was a gentler master-at-arms than Ser Alliser Thorne had been, but his lessons would still raise bruises. Sam winced at every blow, but Jon Snow watched the swordplay closely.

“What do you make of them, Snow?” Donal Noye stood in the door of his armory, bare-chested under a leather apron, the stump of his left arm uncovered for once. With his big gut and barrel chest, his flat nose and bristly black jaw, Noye did not make a pretty sight, but he was a welcome one nonetheless. The armorer had proved himself a good friend.

“They smell of summer,” Jon said as Ser Endrew bullrushed his foe and knocked him sprawling. “Where did Conwy find them?”

“A lord’s dungeon near Gulltown,” the smith replied. “A brigand, a barber, a beggar, two orphans, and a boy whore. With such do we defend the realms of men.”

“They’ll do.” Jon gave Sam a private smile. “We did.”

Noye drew him closer. “You’ve heard these tidings of your brother?”

“Last night.” Conwy and his charges had brought the news north with them, and the talk in the common room had been of little else. Jon was still not certain how he felt about it. Robb a king? The brother he’d played with, fought with, shared his first cup of wine with? *But not mother’s milk, no. So now Robb will sip summerwine from jeweled goblets, while I’m kneeling beside some stream sucking snowmelt from cupped hands.* “Robb will make a good king,” he said loyally.

“Will he now?” The smith eyed him frankly. “I hope that’s so, boy, but once I might have said the same of Robert.”

“They say you forged his warhammer,” Jon remembered.

“Aye. I was his man, a Baratheon man, smith and armorer at Storm’s End until I lost the arm. I’m old enough to remember Lord Steffon before the sea took him, and I knew those three sons of his since they got their names. I tell you this—Robert was never the same after he put on that

crown. Some men are like swords, made for fighting. Hang them up and they go to rust.”

“And his brothers?” Jon asked.

The armorer considered that a moment. “Robert was the true steel. Stannis is pure iron, black and hard and strong, yes, but brittle, the way iron gets. He’ll break before he bends. And Renly, that one, he’s copper, bright and shiny, pretty to look at but not worth all that much at the end of the day.”

And what metal is Robb? Jon did not ask. Noye was a Baratheon man; likely he thought Joffrey the lawful king and Robb a traitor. Among the brotherhood of the Night’s Watch, there was an unspoken pact never to probe too deeply into such matters. Men came to the Wall from all of the Seven Kingdoms, and old loves and loyalties were not easily forgotten, no matter how many oaths a man swore... as Jon himself had good reason to know. Even Sam—his father’s House was sworn to Highgarden, whose Lord Tyrell supported King Renly. Best not to talk of such things. The Night’s Watch took no sides. “Lord Mormont awaits us,” Jon said.

“I won’t keep you from the Old Bear.” Noye clapped him on the shoulder and smiled. “May the gods go with you on the morrow, Snow. You bring back that uncle of yours, you hear?”

“We will,” Jon promised him.

Lord Commander Mormont had taken up residence in the King’s Tower after the fire had gutted his own. Jon left Ghost with the guards outside the door. “More stairs,” said Sam miserably as they started up. “I hate stairs.”

“Well, that’s one thing we won’t face in the wood.”

When they entered the solar, the raven spied them at once. “*Snow!*” the bird shrieked. Mormont broke off his conversation. “Took you long enough with those maps.” He pushed the remains of breakfast out of the way to make room on the table. “Put them here. I’ll have a look at them later.”

Thoren Smallwood, a sinewy ranger with a weak chin and a weaker mouth hidden under a thin scraggle of beard, gave Jon and Sam a cool look. He had been one of Alliser Thorne’s henchmen, and had no love for either

of them. "The Lord Commander's place is at Castle Black, lording and commanding," he told Mormont, ignoring the newcomers, "it seems to me."

The raven flapped big black wings. "*Me, me, me.*"

"If you are ever Lord Commander, you may do as you please," Mormont told the ranger, "but it seems to *me* that I have not died yet, nor have the brothers put you in my place."

"I'm First Ranger now, with Ben Stark lost and Ser Jaremy killed," Smallwood said stubbornly. "The command should be mine."

Mormont would have none of it. "I sent out Ben Stark, and Ser Waymar before him. I do not mean to send you after them and sit wondering how long I must wait before I give you up for lost as well." He pointed. "And Stark remains First Ranger until we know for a certainty that he is dead. Should that day come, it will be me who names his successor, not you. Now stop wasting my time. We ride at first light, or have you forgotten?"

Smallwood pushed to his feet. "As my lord commands." On the way out, he frowned at Jon, as if it were somehow his fault.

"First Ranger!" The Old Bear's eyes lighted on Sam. "I'd sooner name *you* First Ranger. He has the effrontery to tell me to my face that I'm too old to ride with him. Do I look old to you, boy?" The hair that had retreated from Mormont's spotted scalp had regrouped beneath his chin in a shaggy grey beard that covered much of his chest. He thumped it hard. "Do I look *frail*?"

Sam opened his mouth, gave a little squeak. The Old Bear terrified him. "No, my lord," Jon offered quickly. "You look strong as a... a..."

"Don't cozen me, Snow, you know I won't have it. Let me have a look at these maps." Mormont pawed through them brusquely, giving each no more than a glance and a grunt. "Was this all you could find?"

"I... m-m-my lord," Sam stammered, "there... there were more, b-b-but... the dis-disorder..."

"These are old," Mormont complained, and his raven echoed him with a sharp cry of "*Old, old.*"

“The villages may come and go, but the hills and rivers will be in the same places,” Jon pointed out.

“True enough. Have you chosen your ravens yet, Tarly?”

“M-m-maester Aemon m-means to p-pick them come evenfall, after the f-f-feeding.”

“I’ll have his best. Smart birds, and strong.”

“*Strong*,” his own bird said, preening. “*Strong, strong*.”

“If it happens that we’re all butchered out there, I mean for my successor to know where and how we died.”

Talk of butchery reduced Samwell Tarly to speechlessness. Mormont leaned forward. “Tarly, when I was a lad half your age, my lady mother told me that if I stood about with my mouth open, a weasel was like to mistake it for his lair and run down my throat. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, beware of weasels.” He waved a brusque dismissal. “Off with you, I’m too busy for folly. No doubt the maester has some work you can do.”

Sam swallowed, stepped back, and scurried out so quickly he almost tripped over the rushes.

“Is that boy as big a fool as he seems?” the Lord Commander asked when he’d gone. “*Fool*,” the raven complained. Mormont did not wait for Jon to answer. “His lord father stands high in King Renly’s councils, and I had half a notion to dispatch him... no, best not. Renly is not like to heed a quaking fat boy. I’ll send Ser Arnell. He’s a deal steadier, and his mother was one of the green-apple Fossoways.”

“If it please my lord, what would you have of King Renly?”

“The same things I’d have of all of them, lad. Men, horses, swords, armor, grain, cheese, wine, wool, nails... the Night’s Watch is not proud, we take what is offered.” His fingers drummed against the roughhewn planks of the table. “If the winds have been kind, Ser Alliser should reach King’s Landing by the turn of the moon, but whether this boy Joffrey will pay him any heed, I do not know. House Lannister has never been a friend to the Watch.”

“Thorne has the wight’s hand to show them.” A grisly pale thing with black fingers, it was, that twitched and stirred in its jar as if it were still alive.

“Would that we had another hand to send to Renly.”

“Dywen says you can find anything beyond the Wall.”

“Aye, Dywen says. And the last time he went ranging, he says he saw a bear fifteen feet tall.” Mormont snorted. “My sister is said to have taken a bear for her lover. I’d believe *that* before I’d believe one fifteen feet tall. Though in a world where dead come walking... ah, even so, a man must believe his eyes. I have seen the dead walk. I’ve not seen any giant bears.” He gave Jon a long, searching look. “But we were speaking of hands. How is yours?”

“Better.” Jon peeled off his moleskin glove and showed him. Scars covered his arm halfway to the elbow, and the mottled pink flesh still felt tight and tender, but it was healing. “It itches, though. Maester Aemon says that’s good. He gave me a salve to take with me when we ride.”

“You can wield Longclaw despite the pain?”

“Well enough.” Jon flexed his fingers, opening and closing his fist the way the maester had shown him. “I’m to work the fingers every day to keep them nimble, as Maester Aemon said.”

“Blind he may be, but Aemon knows what he’s about. I pray the gods let us keep him another twenty years. Do you know that he might have been king?”

Jon was taken by surprise. “He told me his father was king, but not... I thought him perhaps a younger son.”

“So he was. His father’s father was Daeron Targaryen, the Second of His Name, who brought Dorne into the realm. Part of the pact was that he wed a Dornish princess. She gave him four sons. Aemon’s father Maekar was the youngest of those, and Aemon was *his* third son. Mind you, all this happened long before I was born, ancient as Smallwood would make me.”

“Maester Aemon was named for the Dragonknight.”

“So he was. Some say Prince Aemon was King Daeron’s true father, not Aegon the Unworthy. Be that as it may, our Aemon lacked the Dragonknight’s martial nature. He likes to say he had a slow sword but quick wits. Small wonder his grandfather packed him off to the Citadel. He was nine or ten, I believe... and ninth or tenth in the line of succession as well.”

Maester Aemon had counted more than a hundred name days, Jon knew. Frail, shrunken, wizened, and blind, it was hard to imagine him as a little boy no older than Arya.

Mormont continued. “Aemon was at his books when the eldest of his uncles, the heir apparent, was slain in a tourney mishap. He left two sons, but they followed him to the grave not long after, during the Great Spring Sickness. King Daeron was also taken, so the crown passed to Daeron’s second son, Aerys.”

“The Mad King?” Jon was confused. Aerys had been king before Robert, that wasn’t so long ago.

“No, this was Aerys the First. The one Robert deposed was the second of that name.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Eighty years or close enough,” the Old Bear said, “and no, I *still* hadn’t been born, though Aemon had forged half a dozen links of his maester’s chain by then. Aerys wed his own sister, as the Targaryens were wont to do, and reigned for ten or twelve years. Aemon took his vows and left the Citadel to serve at some lordling’s court... until his royal uncle died without issue. The Iron Throne passed to the last of King Daeron’s four sons. That was Maekar, Aemon’s father. The new king summoned all his sons to court and would have made Aemon part of his councils, but he refused, saying that would usurp the place rightly belonging to the Grand Maester. Instead he served at the keep of his eldest brother, another Daeron. Well, that one died too, leaving only a feeble-witted daughter as heir. Some pox he caught from a whore, I believe. The next brother was Aerion.”

“Aerion the Monstrous?” Jon knew that name. “The Prince Who Thought He Was a Dragon” was one of Old Nan’s more gruesome tales. His

little brother Bran had loved it.

“The very one, though he named himself Aerion Brightflame. One night, in his cups, he drank a jar of wildfire, after telling his friends it would transform him into a dragon, but the gods were kind and it transformed him into a corpse. Not quite a year after, King Maekar died in battle against an outlaw lord.”

Jon was not entirely innocent of the history of the realm; his own maester had seen to that. “That was the year of the Great Council,” he said. “The lords passed over Prince Aerion’s infant son and Prince Daeron’s daughter and gave the crown to Aegon.”

“Yes and no. First they offered it, quietly, to Aemon. And quietly he refused. The gods meant for him to serve, not to rule, he told them. He had sworn a vow and would not break it, though the High Septon himself offered to absolve him. Well, no sane man wanted any blood of Aerion’s on the throne, and Daeron’s girl was a lackwit besides being female, so they had no choice but to turn to Aemon’s younger brother—Aegon, the Fifth of His Name. Aegon the Unlikely, they called him, born the fourth son of a fourth son. Aemon knew, and rightly, that if he remained at court those who disliked his brother’s rule would seek to use him, so he came to the Wall. And here he has remained, while his brother and his brother’s son and *his* son each reigned and died in turn, until Jaime Lannister put an end to the line of the Dragonkings.”

“*King*,” croaked the raven. The bird flapped across the solar to land on Mormont’s shoulder. “*King*,” it said again, strutting back and forth.

“He likes that word,” Jon said, smiling.

“An easy word to say. An easy word to like.”

“*King*,” the bird said again.

“I think he means for you to have a crown, my lord.”

“The realm has three kings already, and that’s two too many for my liking.” Mormont stroked the raven under the beak with a finger, but all the while his eyes never left Jon Snow.

It made him feel odd. “My lord, why have you told me this, about Maester Aemon?”

“Must I have a reason?” Mormont shifted in his seat, frowning. “Your brother Robb has been crowned King in the North. You and Aemon have that in common. A king for a brother.”

“And this too,” said Jon. “A vow.”

The Old Bear gave a loud snort, and the raven took flight, flapping in a circle about the room, “Give me a man for every vow I’ve seen broken and the Wall will never lack for defenders.”

“I’ve always known that Robb would be Lord of Winterfell.”

Mormont gave a whistle, and the bird flew to him again and settled on his arm. “A lord’s one thing, a king’s another.” He offered the raven a handful of corn from his pocket. “They will garb your brother Robb in silks, satins, and velvets of a hundred different colors, while you live and die in black ringmail. He will wed some beautiful princess and father sons on her. You’ll have no wife, nor will you ever hold a child of your own blood in your arms. Robb will rule, you will serve. Men will call you a crow. Him they’ll call *Your Grace*. Singers will praise every little thing he does, while your greatest deeds all go unsung. Tell me that none of this troubles you, Jon... and I’ll name you a liar, and know I have the truth of it.”

Jon drew himself up, taut as a bowstring. “And if it *did* trouble me, what might I do, bastard as I am?”

“What *will* you do?” Mormont asked. “Bastard as you are?”

“Be troubled,” said Jon, “and keep my vows.”