

“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. Maegh 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.