

Ghost ran with them for a time and then vanished among the trees. Without the direwolf, Jon felt almost naked. He found himself glancing at every shadow with unease. Unbidden, he thought back on the tales that Old Nan used to tell them, when he was a boy at Winterfell. He could almost hear her voice again, and the click-click-click of her needles. In that darkness, the Others came riding, she used to say, dropping her voice lower and lower. Cold and dead they were, and they hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every living creature with hot blood in its veins. Holdfasts and cities and kingdoms of men all fell before them, as they moved south on pale dead horses, leading hosts of the slain. They fed their dead servants on the flesh of human children...

When he caught his first glimpse of the Wall looming above the tops of an ancient gnarled oak, Jon was vastly relieved. Mormont reined up suddenly and turned in his saddle. “Tarly,” he barked, “come here.”

Jon saw the start of fright on Sam's face as he lumbered up on his mare; doubtless he thought he was in trouble. "You're fat but you're not stupid, boy," the Old Bear said gruffly. "You did well back there. And you, Snow."

Sam blushed a vivid crimson and tripped over his own tongue as he tried to stammer out a courtesy. Jon had to smile.

When they emerged from under the trees, Mormont spurred his tough little garron to a trot. Ghost came streaking out from the woods to meet them, licking his chops, his muzzle red from prey. High above, the men on the Wall saw the column approaching. Jon heard the deep, throaty call of the watchman's great horn, calling out across the miles; a single long blast that shuddered through the trees and echoed off the ice.

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The sound faded slowly to silence. One blast meant rangers returning, and Jon thought, I was a ranger for one day, at least. Whatever may come, they cannot take that away from me.

Bowen Marsh was waiting at the first gate as they led their garrons through the icy tunnel. The Lord Steward was red-faced and agitated. "My lord," he blurted at Mormont as he swung open the iron bars, "there's been a bird, you must come at once."

“What is it, man?” Mormont said gruffly.

Curiously, Marsh glanced at Jon before he answered. “Maester Aemon has the letter. He’s waiting in your solar.”

“Very well. Jon, see to my horse, and tell Ser Jaremy to put the dead men in a storeroom until the maester is ready for them.” Mormont strode away grumbling.

As they led their horses back to the stable, Jon was uncomfortably aware that people were watching him. Ser Alliser Thorne was drilling his boys in the yard, but he broke off to stare at Jon, a faint half smile on his lips. One-armed Donal Noye stood in the door of the armory. “The gods be with you, Snow,” he called out.

Something's wrong, Jon thought. Something's very wrong.

The dead men were carried to one of the storerooms along the base of the Wall, a dark cold cell chiseled from the ice and used to keep meat and grain and sometimes even beer. Jon saw that