

The Old Bear rolled up the paper. "Your firsts will instruct you in your duties. May all the gods preserve you, brothers." The Lord Commander favored them with a half bow, and took his leave. Ser Alliser went with him, a thin smile on his face. Jon had never seen the master-at-arms look quite so happy.

"Rangers with me," Ser Jaremy Rykker called when they were gone.

Pyp was staring at Jon as he got slowly to his feet. His ears were red. Grenn, grinning broadly, did not seem to realize that anything was amiss. Matt and Toad fell in beside them, and they followed Ser Jaremy from the sept.

"Builders," announced lantern-jawed Othell Yarwyck. Halder and Albett trailed out after him. Jon looked around him in sick disbelief. Maester Aemon's blind eyes were raised toward the light he could not see. The septon was arranging crystals on the altar. Only Sam and Darcon remained on the benches; a fat boy, a singer... and him.

Lord Steward Bowen Marsh rubbed his plump hands together. "Samwell, you will assist Maester Aemon in the rookery and library. Chett is going to the kennels, to help with the hounds. You shall have his cell, so as to be close to the maester night and day. I trust you will take good care of him. He is very old and very precious to us.

"Dareon, I am told that you sang at many a high lord's table and shared their meat and mead. We are sending you to Eastwatch. It may be your palate will be some help to Cotter Pyke when merchant galleys come trading. We are paying too dear for salt beef and pickled fish, and the quality of the olive oil we're getting has been frightful. Present yourself to Borcas when you arrive, he will keep you busy between ships."

Marsh turned his smile on Jon. "Lord Commander Mormont has requested you for his personal steward, Jon. You'll sleep in a cell beneath his chambers, in the Lord Commander's tower."

"And what will my duties be?" Jon asked sharply. "Will I serve the Lord Commander's meals, help him fasten his clothes, fetch hot water for his bath?"

"Certainly." Marsh frowned at Jon's tone. "And you will run his messages, keep a fire burning in his chambers, change his sheets and blankets daily, and do all else that the Lord Commander might require of YOU."

"Do you take me for a servant?"

"No," Maester Aemon said, from the back of the sept. Clydas helped him stand. "We took you for a man of Night's Watch... but perhaps we were wrong in that."

It was all Jon could do to stop himself from walking out. Was he supposed to churn butter and sew doublets like a girl for the rest of his days? "May I go?" he asked stiffly.

"As you wish," Bowen Marsh responded.

Dareon and Sam left with him. They descended to the yard in silence. Outside, Jon looked up at the Wall shining in the sun, the melting ice creeping down its side in a hundred thin fingers. Jon's rage was such that he would have smashed it all in an instant, and the world be damned.

"Jon," Samwell Tarly said excitedly. "Wait. Don't you see what they're doing?"

Jon turned on him in a fury. "I see Ser Alliser's bloody hand, that's all I see. He wanted to shame me, and he has."