

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..."