

Samwell Tarly awaited them in the old stables, slumped on the ground against a bale of hay, too anxious to sleep. He rose and brushed himself off. "I... I'm glad they found you, Jon."

"I'm not," Jon said, dismounting.

Pyp hopped off his horse and looked at the lightening sky with disgust. "Give us a hand bedding down the horses, Sam," the small boy said. "We have a long day before us, and no sleep to face it on, thanks to Lord Snow."

When day broke, Jon walked to the kitchens as he did every dawn. Three-Finger Hobb said nothing as he gave him the Old Bear's breakfast. Today it was three brown eggs boiled hard, with fried bread and ham steak and a bowl of wrinkled plums. Jon carried the food back to the King's Tower. He found Mormont at the window seat, writing. His raven was walking back and forth across his shoulders, muttering, "Corn, corn, corn." The bird shrieked when Jon entered. "Put the food on the table," the Old Bear said, glancing up. "I'll have some beer."

Jon opened a shuttered window, took the flagon of beer off the outside ledge, and filled a horn. Hobb had given him a lemon, still cold from the Wall. Jon crushed it in his fist. The juice trickled through his fingers. Mormont drank lemon in his beer every day, and claimed that was why he still had his own teeth.

"Doubtless you loved your father," Mormont said when Jon brought him his horn. "The things we love destroy us every time, lad. Remember when I told you that?"

"I remember," Jon said sullenly. He did not care to talk of his father's death, not even to Mormont.

"See that you never forget it. The hard truths are the ones to hold tight. Fetch me my plate. Is it ham again? So be it. You look weary. Was your moonlight ride so tiring?"

Jon's throat was dry. "You know?"

"Know," the raven echoed from Mormont's shoulder. "Know."

The Old Bear snorted. "Do you think they chose me Lord Commander of the Night's Watch because I'm dumb as a stump, Snow? Aemon told me you'd go. I told him you'd be back. I know my men... and my boys too. Honor set you on the kingsroad... and honor brought you back."

"My friends brought me back," Jon said.

"Did I say it was your honor?" Mormont inspected his plate.

"They killed my father. Did you expect me to do nothing?"

"If truth be told, we expected you to do just as you did." Mormont tried a plum, spit out the pit. "I ordered a watch kept over you., You were seen leaving. If your brothers had not fetched you back, you would have been taken along the way, and not by friends. Unless you have a horse with wings like a raven. Do you?"

"No." Jon felt like a fool.

"Pity, we could use a horse like that."

Jon stood tall. He told himself that he would die well; that much he could do, at the least. "I know the penalty for desertion, my lord. I'm not afraid to die."

"Die!" the raven cried.