

Mormont grumbled. "That's all they're good for, ravens. Why I put up with that pestilential bird... if there was news of Lord Eddard, don't you think I would have sent for you? Bastard or no, you're still his blood. The message concerned Ser Barristan Selmy. It seems he's been removed from the Kingsguard. They gave his place to that black dog Clegane, and now Selmy's wanted for treason. The fools sent some watchmen to seize him, but he slew two of them and escaped." Mormont snorted, leaving no doubt of his view of men who'd send gold cloaks against a knight as renowned as Barristan the Bold. "We have white shadows in the woods and unquiet dead stalking our halls, and a boy sits the Iron Throne," he said in disgust.

The raven laughed shrilly. "Boy, boy, boy, boy."

Ser Barristan had been the Old Bear's best hope, Jon remembered; if he had fallen, what chance was there that Mormont's letter would be heeded? He curled his hand into a fist. Pain shot through his burned fingers. "What of my sisters?"

"The message made no mention of Lord Eddard or the girls." He gave an irritated shrug. "Perhaps they never got my letter. Aemon sent two copies, with his best birds, but who can say? More like, Pycelle did not deign to reply. It would not be the first time, nor the last. I fear we count for less than nothing in King's Landing. They tell us what they want us to know, and that's little enough."

And you tell me what you want me to know, and that's less, Jon thought resentfully. His brother Robb had called the banners and ridden south to war, yet no word of that had been breathed to him... save by Samwell Tarly, who'd read the letter to Maester Aemon and whispered its contents to Jon that night in secret, all the time saying how he shouldn't. Doubtless they thought his brother's war was none of his concern. It troubled him more than he could say. Robb was marching and he was not. No matter how often Jon told himself that his place was here now, with his new brothers on the Wall, he still felt craven.

"Corn," the raven was crying. "Corn, corn. "

"Oh, be quiet," the Old Bear told it. "Snow, how soon does Maester Aemon say you'll have use of that hand back?"

"Soon," Jon replied.

"Good." On the table between them, Lord Mormont laid a large sword in a black metal scabbard banded with silver. "Here. You'll be ready for this, then."

The raven flapped down and landed on the table, strutting toward the sword, head cocked curiously. Jon hesitated. He had no inkling what this meant. "My lord?"

"The fire melted the silver off the pommel and burnt the crossguard and grip. Well, dry leather and old wood, what could you expect? The blade, now... you'd need a fire a hundred times as hot to harm the blade." Mormont shoved the scabbard across the rough oak planks. "I had the rest made anew. Take it."

"Take it," echoed his raven, preening. "Take it, take it."

Awkwardly, Jon took the sword in hand. His left hand; his bandaged right was still too raw and clumsy. Carefully he pulled it from its scabbard and raised it level with his eyes.