

“You said the words,” Pyp reminded him. “Now my watch begins, you said it. It shall not end until my death. “

“I shall live and die at my post, “ Grenn added, nodding.

“You don’t have to tell me the words, I know them as well as you do.” He was angry now. Why couldn’t they let him go in peace? They were only making it harder.

“I am the sword in the darkness, “ Halder intoned.

“The watcher on the walls, “ piped Toad.

Jon cursed them all to their faces. They took no notice. Pyp spurred his horse closer, reciting, “I am the fire that Burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. “

“Stay back,” Jon warned him, brandishing his sword. “I mean it, Pyp.” They weren’t even wearing armor, he could cut them to pieces if he had to.

Matthar had circled behind him. He joined the chorus. “I pledge my life and honor to the Night’s Watch. “

Jon kicked his mare, spinning her in a circle. The boys were all around him now, closing from every side.

“For this night Halder trotted in from the left...

... and all the nights to come, “ finished Pyp. He reached over for Jon’s reins. “So here are your choices. Kill me, or come back with me.”

Jon lifted his sword... and lowered it, helpless. “Damn you,” he said. “Damn you all.”

“Do we have to bind your hands, or will you give us your word you’ll ride back peaceful?” asked Halder.

“I won’t run, if that’s what you mean.” Ghost moved out from under the trees and Jon glared at him. “Small help you were,” he said. The deep red eyes looked at him knowingly.

“We had best hurry,” Pyp said. “If we’re not back before first light, the Old Bear will have all our heads.”

Of the ride back, Jon Snow remembered little. It seemed shorter than the journey south, perhaps because his mind was elsewhere. Pyp set the pace, galloping, walking, trotting, and then breaking into another gallop. Mole’s Town came and went, the red lantern over the brothel long extinguished. They made good time. Dawn was still an hour off when Jon glimpsed the towers of Castle Black ahead of them, dark against the pale immensity of the Wall. It did not seem like home this time.

They could take him back, Jon told himself, but they could not make him stay. The war would not end on the morrow, or the day after, and his friends could not watch him day and night. He would bide his time, make them think he was content to remain here... and then, when they had grown lax, he would be off again. Next time he would avoid the kingsroad. He could follow the Wall east, perhaps all the way to the sea, a longer route but a safer one. Or even west, to the mountains, and then south over the high passes. That was the wildling’s way, hard and perilous, but at least no one would follow him. He wouldn’t stray within a hundred leagues of Winterfell or the kingsroad.