

realm against the Others, but it was better not to speak of the things you wanted. “The rangers say it’s just woods and mountains and frozen lakes, with lots of snow and ice.”

“And the grumkins and the snarks,” Tyrion said. “Let us not forget them, Lord Snow, or else what’s that big thing for?”

“Don’t call me Lord Snow.”

The dwarf lifted an eyebrow. “Would you rather be called the Imp? Let them see that their words can cut you, and you’ll never be free of the mockery. If they want to give you a name, take it, make it your own. Then they can’t hurt you with it anymore.” He gestured with his stick. “Come, walk with me. They’ll be serving some vile stew in the common hall by now, and I could do with a bowl of something hot.”

Jon was hungry too, so he fell in beside Lannister and slowed his pace to match the dwarf’s awkward, waddling steps. The wind was rising, and they could hear the old wooden buildings creaking around them, and in the distance a heavy shutter banging, over and over, forgotten. Once there was a muffled thump as a blanket of snow slid from a roof and landed near them.

“I don’t see your wolf,” Lannister said as they walked.

“I chain him up in the old stables when we’re training. They board all the horses in the east stables now, so no one bothers him. The rest of the time he stays with me. My sleeping cell is in Hardin’s Tower.”

“That’s the one with the broken battlement, no? Shattered stone in the yard below, and a lean to it like our noble king Robert after a long night’s drinking? I thought all those buildings had been abandoned.”

Jon shrugged. “No one cares where you sleep. Most of the old keeps are empty, you can pick any cell you want.” Once Castle Black had housed five thousand fighting men with all their horses and servants and weapons. Now it was home to a tenth that number, and parts of it were falling into ruin.

Tyrion Lannister’s laughter steamed in the cold air. “I’ll be sure to tell your father to arrest more stonemasons, before your tower collapses.”

Jon could taste the mockery there, but there was no denying the truth. The Watch had built nineteen great strongholds along the Wall, but only three were still occupied: Eastwatch on its grey windswept shore, the Shadow Tower hard by the mountains where the Wall ended, and Castle Black between them, at the end of the kingsroad. The other keeps, long deserted, were lonely, haunted places, where cold winds whistled through black windows and the spirits of the dead manned the parapets.

“It’s better that I’m by myself,” Jon said stubbornly. “The rest of them are scared of Ghost.”

“Wise boys,” Lannister said. Then he changed the subject. “The talk is, your uncle is too long away.”

Jon remembered the wish he’d wished in his anger, the vision of Benjen Stark dead in the snow, and he looked away quickly. The dwarf had a way of sensing things, and Jon did not want him to see the guilt in his eyes. “He said he’d be back by my name day,” he admitted. His name day had come and gone, unremarked, a fortnight past. “They were looking for Ser Waymar Royce, his