

again, then thought better of this fight. She turned and slunk away, with one last defiant snap to save her pride. Ghost went back to his meal.

Jon grinned and reached under the table to ruffle the shaggy white fur. The direwolf looked up at him, nipped gently at his hand, then went back to eating.

“Is this one of the direwolves I’ve heard so much of?” a familiar voice asked close at hand.

Jon looked up happily as his uncle Ben put a hand on his head and ruffled his hair much as Jon had ruffled the wolf s. “Yes,” he said. “His name is Ghost.”

One of the squires interrupted the bawdy story he’d been telling to make room at the table for their lord’s brother. Benjen Stark straddled the bench with, long legs and took the wine cup out of Jon’s hand. “Summerwine,” he said after a taste. “Nothing so sweet. How many cups have you had, Jon?”

Jon smiled.

Ben Stark laughed. “As I feared. Ah, well. I believe I was younger than you the first time I got truly and sincerely drunk.” He snagged a roasted onion, dripping brown with gravy, from a nearby trencher and bit into it. It crunched.

His uncle was sharp-featured and gaunt as a mountain crag, but there was always a hint of laughter in his blue-grey eyes. He dressed in black, as befitted a man of the Night’s Watch. Tonight it was rich black velvet, with high leather boots and a wide belt with a silver buckle. A heavy silver chain was looped round his neck. Benjen watched Ghost with amusement as he ate his onion. “A very quiet wolf,” he observed.

“He’s not like the others,” Jon said. “He never makes a sound. That’s why I named him Ghost. That, and because he’s white. The others are all dark, grey or black.”

“There are still direwolves beyond the Wall. We hear them on our rangings.” Benjen Stark gave Jon a long look. “Don’t you usually eat at table with your brothers?”

“Most times,” Jon answered in a flat voice. “But tonight Lady Stark thought it might give insult to the royal family to seat a bastard among them.”

“I see.” His uncle glanced over his shoulder at the raised table at the far end of the hall. “My brother does not seem very festive tonight.”

Jon had noticed that too. A bastard had to learn to notice things, to read the truth that people hid behind their eyes. His father was observing all the courtesies, but there was tightness in him that Jon had seldom seen before. He said little, looking out over the hall with hooded eyes, seeing nothing. Two seats away, the king had been drinking heavily all night. His broad face was flushed behind his great black beard. He made many a toast, laughed loudly at every jest, and attacked each dish like a starving man, but beside him the queen seemed as cold as an ice sculpture. “The queen is angry too,” Jon told his uncle in a low, quiet voice. “Father took the king down to the crypts this afternoon. The queen didn’t want him to go.”

Benjen gave Jon a careful, measuring look. “You don’t miss much, do you, Jon? We could use a man like you on the Wall.”

Jon swelled with pride. “Robb is a stronger lance than I am, but I’m the better sword, and Hullen says I sit a horse as well as anyone in the castle.”