

“Your duty is here now,” the Lord Commander reminded him. “Your old life ended when you took the black.” His bird made a raucous echo. “Black. “ Mormont took no notice. “Whatever they do in King’s Landing is none of our concern.” When Jon did not answer, the old man finished his wine and said, “You’re free to go. I’ll have no further need of you today. On the morrow you can help me write that letter.”

Jon did not remember standing or leaving the solar. The next he knew, he was descending the tower steps, thinking, This is my father, my sisters, how can it be none of my concern?

Outside, one of the guards looked at him and said, “Be strong, boy. The gods are cruel.”

They know, Jon realized. “My father is no traitor,” he said hoarsely. Even the words stuck in his throat, as if to choke him. The wind was rising, and it seemed colder in the yard than it had when he’d gone in. Spirit summer was drawing to an end.

The rest of the afternoon passed as if in a dream. Jon could not have said where he walked, what he did, who he spoke with. Ghost was with him, he knew that much. The silent presence of the direwolf gave him comfort. The girls do not even have that much, he thought. Their wolves might have kept them safe, but Lady is dead and Nymeria’s lost, they’re all alone.

A north wind had begun to blow by the time the sun went down. Jon could hear it skirling against the Wall and over the icy battlements as he went to the common hall for the evening meal. Hobb had cooked up a venison stew, thick with barley, onions, and carrots. When he spooned an extra portion onto Jon’s plate and gave him the crusty heel of the bread, he knew what it meant. He knows. He looked around the hall, saw heads turn quickly, eyes politely averted. They all know.

His friends rallied to him. “We asked the septon to light a candle for your father,” Matthar told him. “It’s a lie, we all know it’s a lie, even Grenn knows it’s a lie,” Pyp chimed in. Grenn nodded, and Sam clasped Jon’s hand, “You’re my brother now, so he’s my father too,” the fat boy said. “If you want to go out to the weirwoods and pray to the old gods, I’ll go with you.”

The weirwoods were beyond the Wall, yet he knew Sam meant what he said. They are my brothers, he thought. As much as Robb and Bran and Rickon...

And then he heard the laughter, sharp and cruel as a whip, and the voice of Ser Alliser Thorne. “Not only a bastard, but a traitor’s bastard,” he was telling the men around him.

In the blink of an eye, Jon had vaulted onto the table, dagger in his hand. Pyp made a grab for him, but he wrenched his leg away, and then he was sprinting down the table and kicking the bowl from Ser Alliser’s hand. Stew went flying everywhere, spattering the brothers. Thorne recoiled. People were shouting, but Jon Snow did not hear them. He lunged at Ser Alliser’s face with the dagger, slashing at those cold onyx eyes, but Sam threw himself between them and before Jon could get around him, Pyp was on his back clinging like a monkey, and Grenn was grabbing his arm while Toad wrenched the knife from his fingers.

Later, much later, after they had marched him back to his sleeping cell, Mormont came down to see him, raven on his shoulder. “I told you not to do anything stupid, boy,” the Old Bear said. “Boy, “ the bird chorused. Mormont shook his head, disgusted. “And to think I had high hopes for you.”