

Mormont frowned through his thick grey beard. "Snow? Oh, the Stark bastard. I think not. The young ones need to forget the lives they left behind them, the brothers and mothers and all that. A visit home would only stir up feelings best left alone. I know these things. My own blood kin... my sister Maegh rules Bear Island now, since my son's dishonor. I have nieces I have never seen." He took a swallow. "Besides, Jon Snow is only a boy. You shall have three strong swords, to keep you safe."

"I am touched by your concern, Lord Mormont." The strong drink was making Tyrion light-headed, but not so drunk that he did not realize that the Old Bear wanted something from him. "I hope I can repay your kindness."

"You can," Mormont said bluntly. "Your sister sits beside the king. Your brother is a great knight, and your father the most powerful lord in the Seven Kingdoms. Speak to them for us. Tell them of our need here. You have seen for yourself, my lord. The Night's Watch is dying. Our strength is less than a thousand now. Six hundred here, two hundred in the Shadow Tower, even fewer at Eastwatch, and a scant third of those fighting men. The Wall is a hundred leagues long. Think on that. Should an attack come, I have three men to defend each mile of wall."

"Three and a third," Tyrion said with a yawn.

Mormont scarcely seemed to hear him. The old man warmed his hands before the fire. "I sent Benjen Stark to search after Yohn Royce's son, lost on his first ranging. The Royce boy was green as summer grass, yet he insisted on the honor of his own command, saying it was his due as a knight. I did not wish to offend his lord father, so I yielded. I sent him out with two men I deemed as good as any in the Watch. More fool."

"Fool," the raven agreed. Tyrion glanced up. The bird peered down at him with those beady black eyes, ruffling its wings. "Fool," it called again. Doubtless old Mormont would take it amiss if he throttled the creature. A pity.

The Lord Commander took no notice of the irritating bird. "Gared was near as old as I am and longer on the Wall," he went on, "yet it would seem he forswore himself and fled. I should never have believed it, not of him, but Lord Eddard sent me his head from Winterfell. Of Royce, there is no word. One deserter and two men lost, and now Ben Stark too has gone missing." He sighed deeply. "Who am I to send searching after him? In two years I will be seventy. Too old and too weary for the burden I bear, yet if I set it down, who will pick it up? Alliser Thorne? Bowen Marsh? I would have to be as blind as Maester Aemon not to see what they are. The Night's Watch has become an army of sullen boys and tired old men. Apart from the men at my table tonight, I have perhaps twenty who can read, and even fewer who can think, or plan, or lead. Once the Watch spent its summers building, and each Lord Commander raised the Wall higher than he found it. Now it is all we can do to stay alive."

He was in deadly earnest, Tyrion realized. He felt faintly embarrassed for the old man. Lord Mormont had spent a good part of his life on the Wall, and he needed to believe if those years were to have any meaning. "I promise, the king will hear of your need," Tyrion said gravely, "and I will speak to my father and my brother Jaime as well." And he would. Tyrion Lannister