

“Leave him where he is,” Chett said. “The Wall is no place for the weak. Let him train until he is ready, no matter how many years that takes. Ser Alliser shall make a man of him or kill him, as the gods will.”

“That’s stupid,” Jon said. He took a deep breath to gather his thoughts. “I remember once I asked Maester Luwin why he wore a chain around his throat.”

Maester Aemon touched his own collar lightly, his bony, wrinkled finger stroking the heavy metal links. “Go on.”

“He told me that a maester’s collar is made of chain to remind him that he is sworn to serve,” Jon said, remembering. “I asked why each link was a different metal. A silver chain would look much finer with his grey robes, I said. Maester Luwin laughed. A maester forges his chain with study, he told me. The different metals are each a different kind of learning, gold for the study of money and accounts, silver for healing, iron for warcraft. And he said there were other meanings as well. The collar is supposed to remind a maester of the realm he serves, isn’t that so? Lords are gold and knights steel, but two links can’t make a chain. You also need silver and iron and lead, tin and copper and bronze and all the rest, and those are farmers and smiths and merchants and the like. A chain needs all sorts of metals, and a land needs all sorts of people.”

Maester Aemon smiled. “And so?”

“The Night’s Watch needs all sorts too. Why else have rangers and stewards and builders? Lord Randyll couldn’t make Sam a warrior, and Ser Alliser won’t either. You can’t hammer tin into iron, no matter how hard you beat it, but that doesn’t mean tin is useless. Why shouldn’t Sam be a steward?”

Chett gave an angry scowl. “I’m a steward. You think it’s easy work, fit for cowards? The order of stewards keeps the Watch alive. We hunt and farm, tend the horses, milk the cows, gather firewood, cook the meals. Who do you think makes your clothing? Who brings up supplies from the south? The stewards.”

Maester Aemon was gentler. “Is your friend a hunter?”

“He hates hunting,” Jon had to admit.

“Can he plow a field?” the maester asked. “Can he drive a wagon or sail a ship? Could he butcher a cow?”

“No...”

Chett gave a nasty laugh. “I’ve seen what happens to soft lordlings when they’re put to work. Set them to churning butter and their hands blister and bleed. Give them an axe to split logs, and they cut off their own foot.”

“I know one thing Sam could do better than anyone.”

“Yes?” Maester Aemon prompted.

Jon glanced warily at Chett, standing beside the door, his boils red and angry. “He could help you,” he said quickly. “He can do sums, and he knows how to read and write. I know Chett can’t read, and Clydas has weak eyes. Sam read every book in his father’s library. He’d be good with the ravens too. Animals seem to like him. Ghost took to him straight off. There’s a lot he could