

paused for a moment before he said, "Are there any among you who wish to leave our company? If so, go now, and no one shall think the less of you."

No one moved.

"Well and good," said Mormont. "You may take your vows here at evenfall, before Septon Celladar and the first of your order. Do any of you keep to the old gods?"

Jon stood. "I do, my lord."

"I expect you will want to say your words before a heart tree, as your uncle did," Mormont said.

"Yes, my lord," Jon said. The gods of the sept had nothing to do with him; the blood of the First Men flowed in the veins of the Starks.

He heard Grenn whispering behind him. "There's no godswood here. Is there? I never saw a godswood."

"You wouldn't see a herd of aurochs until they trampled you into the snow," Pyp whispered back.

"I would so," Grenn insisted. "I'd see them a long way off."

Mormont himself confirmed Grenn's doubts. "Castle Black has no need of a godswood. Beyond the Wall the haunted forest stands as it stood in the Dawn Age, long before the Andals brought the Seven across the narrow sea. You will find a grove of weirwoods half a league from this spot, and mayhap your gods as well."

"My lord." The voice made Jon glance back in surprise. Samwell Tarly was on his feet. The fat boy wiped his sweaty palms against his tunic. "Might I... might I go as well? To say my words at this heart tree?"

"Does House Tarly keep the old gods too?" Mormont asked.

"No, my lord," Sam replied in a thin, nervous voice. The high officers frightened him, Jon knew, the Old Bear most of all. "I was named in the light of the Seven at the sept on Horn Hill, as my father was, and his father, and all the Tarlys for a thousand years."

"Why would you forsake the gods of your father and your House?" wondered Ser Jaremy Rykker.

"The Night's Watch is my House now," Sam said. "The Seven have never answered my prayers. Perhaps the old gods will."

"As you wish, boy," Mormont said. Sam took his seat again, as did Jon. "We have placed each of you in an order, as befits our need and your own strengths and skills." Bowen Marsh stepped forward and handed him a paper. The Lord Commander unrolled it and began to read. "Halder, to the builders," he began. Halder gave a stiff nod of approval. "Grenn, to the rangers. Albett, to the builders. Pypar, to the rangers." Pyp looked over at Jon and wiggled his ears. "Samwell, to the stewards." Sam sagged with relief, mopping at his brow with a scrap of silk. "Matthar, to the rangers. Dareon, to the stewards. Todder, to the rangers. Jon, to the stewards."

The stewards? For a moment Jon could not believe what he had heard. Mormont must have read it wrong. He started to rise, to open his mouth, to tell them there had been a mistake... and then he saw Ser Alliser studying him, eyes shiny as two flakes of obsidian, and he knew.