

“The maester is abed, as you should be. Come back on the morrow and maybe he’ll see you.” He began to shut the door.

Jon jammed it open with his boot. “I need to speak to him now. The morning will be too late.”

Chett scowled. “The maester is not accustomed to being woken in the night. Do you know how old he is?”

“Old enough to treat visitors with more courtesy than you,” Jon said. “Give him my pardons. I would not disturb his rest if it were not important.”

“And if I refuse?”

Jon had his boot wedged solidly in the door. “I can stand here all night if I must.”

The black brother made a disgusted noise and opened the door to admit him. “Wait in the library. There’s wood. Start a fire. I won’t have the maester catching a chill on account of you.”

Jon had the logs crackling merrily by the time Chett led in Maester Aemon. The old man was clad in his bed robe, but around his throat was the chain collar of his order. A maester did not remove it even to sleep. “The chair beside the fire would be pleasant,” he said when he felt the warmth on his face. When he was settled comfortably, Chett covered his legs with a fur and went to stand by the door.

“I am sorry to have woken you, Maester,” Jon Snow said.

“You did not wake me,” Maester Aemon replied. “I find I need less sleep as I grow older, and I am grown very old. I often spend half the night with ghosts, remembering times fifty years past as if they were yesterday. The mystery of a midnight visitor is a welcome diversion. So tell me, Jon Snow, why have you come calling at this strange hour?”

“To ask that Samwell Tarly be taken from training and accepted as a brother of the Night’s Watch.”

“This is no concern of Maester Aemon,” Chett complained.

“Our Lord Commander has given the training of recruits into the hands of Ser Alliser Thorne,” the maester said gently. “Only he may say when a boy is ready to swear his vow, as you surely know. Why then come to me?”

“The Lord Commander listens to you,” Jon told him. “And the wounded and the sick of the Night’s Watch are in your charge.”

“And is your friend Samwell wounded or sick?”

“He will be,” Jon promised, “unless you help.”

He told them all of it, even the part where he’d set Ghost at Rast’s throat. Maester Aemon listened silently, blind eyes fixed on the fire, but Chett’s face darkened with each word. “Without us to keep him safe, Sam will have no chance,” Jon finished. “He’s hopeless with a sword. My sister Arya could tear him apart, and she’s not yet ten. If Ser Alliser makes him fight, it’s only a matter of time before he’s hurt or killed.”

Chett could stand no more. “I’ve seen this fat boy in the common hall,” he said. “He is a pig, and a hopeless craven as well, if what you say is true.”

“Maybe it is so,” Maester Aemon said. “Tell me, Chett, what would you have us do with such a boy?”