

Whatever demonic force moved Othor had been driven out by the flames; the twisted thing they had found in the ashes had been no more than cooked meat and charred bone. Yet in his nightmare he faced it again... and this time the burning corpse wore Lord Eddard's features. It was his father's skin that burst and blackened, his father's eyes that ran liquid down his cheeks like jellied tears. Jon did not understand why that should be or what it might mean, but it frightened him more than he could say.

"A sword's small payment for a life," Mormont concluded. "Take it, I'll hear no more of it, is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord." The soft leather gave beneath Jon's fingers, as if the sword were molding itself to his grip already. He knew he should be honored, and he was, and yet...

He is not my father. The thought leapt unbidden to Jon's mind. Lord Eddard Stark is my father. I will not forget him, no matter how many swords they give me. Yet he could scarcely tell Lord Mormont that it was another man's sword he dreamt of...

"I want no courtesies either," Mormont said, "so thank me no thanks. Honor the steel with deeds, not words."

Jon nodded. "Does it have a name, my lord?"

"It did, once. Longclaw, it was called."

"Claw, " the raven cried. "Claw. "

"Longclaw is an apt name." Jon tried a practice cut. He was clumsy and uncomfortable with his left hand, yet even so the steel seemed to flow through the air, as if it had a will of its own.

"Wolves have claws, as much as bears."

The Old Bear seemed pleased by that. "I suppose they do. You'll want to wear that over the shoulder, I imagine. It's too long for the hip, at least until you've put on a few inches. And you'll need to work at your two-handed strikes as well. Ser Endrew can show you some moves, when your burns have healed."

"Ser Endrew?" Jon did not know the name.

"Ser Endrew Tarth, a good man. He's on his way from the Shadow Tower to assume the duties of master-at-arms. Ser Alliser Thorne left yestermorn for Eastwatch-by-the-Sea."

Jon lowered the sword. "Why?" he said, stupidly.

Mormont snorted. "Because I sent him, why do you think? He's bringing the hand your Ghost tore off the end of Jafer Flowers's wrist. I have commanded him to take ship to King's Landing and lay it before this boy king. That should get young Joffrey's attention, I'd think... and Ser Alliser's a knight, highborn, anointed, with old friends at court, altogether harder to ignore than a glorified crow."

"Crow. " Jon thought the raven sounded faintly indignant.

"As well," the Lord Commander continued, ignoring the bird's protest, "it puts a thousand leagues twixt him and you without it seeming a rebuke." He jabbed a finger up at Jon's face.

"And don't think this means I approve of that nonsense in the common hall. Valor makes up for a fair amount of folly, but you're not a boy anymore, however many years you've seen. That's a