

JON

Jon was breaking his fast on applecakes and blood sausage when Samwell Tarly plopped himself down on the bench. “I’ve been summoned to the sept,” Sam said in an excited whisper. “They’re passing me out of training. I’m to be made a brother with the rest of you. Can you believe it?”

“No, truly?”

“Truly. I’m to assist Maester Aemon with the library and the birds. He needs someone who can read and write letters.”

“You’ll do well at that,” Jon said, smiling.

Sam glanced about anxiously. “Is it time to go? I shouldn’t be late, they might change their minds.” He was fairly bouncing as they crossed the weed-strewn courtyard. The day was warm and sunny. Rivulets of water trickled down the sides of the Wall, so the ice seemed to sparkle and shine.

Inside the sept, the great crystal caught the morning light as it streamed through the south-facing window and spread it in a rainbow on the altar. Pyp’s mouth dropped open when he caught sight of Sam, and Toad poked Grenn in the ribs, but no one dared say a word. Septon Celladar was swinging a censer, filling the air with fragrant incense that reminded Jon of Lady Stark’s little sept in Winterfell. For once the septon seemed sober.

The high officers arrived in a body; Maester Aemon leaning on Clydas, Ser Alliser cold-eyed and grim, Lord Commander Mormont resplendent in a black wool doublet with silvered bearclaw fastenings. Behind them came the senior members of the three orders: red-faced Bowen Marsh the Lord Steward, First Builder Othell Yarwyck, and Ser Jaremy Rykker, who commanded the rangers in the absence of Benjen Stark.

Mormont stood before the altar, the rainbow shining on his broad bald head. “You came to us outlaws,” he began, “poachers, rapers, debtors, killers, and thieves. You came to us children. You came to us alone, in chains, with neither friends nor honor. You came to us rich, and you came to us poor. Some of you bear the names of proud houses. Others have only bastards’ names, or no names at all. It makes no matter. All that is past now. On the Wall, we are all one house.

“At evenfall, as the sun sets and we face the gathering night, you shall take your vows. From that moment, you will be a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch. Your crimes will be washed away, your debts forgiven. So too you must wash away your former loyalties, put aside your grudges, forget old wrongs and old loves alike. Here you begin anew.

“A man of the Night’s Watch lives his life for the realm. Not for a king, nor a lord, nor the honor of this house or that house, neither for gold nor glory nor a woman’s love, but for the realm, and all the people in it. A man of the Night’s Watch takes no wife and fathers no sons. Our wife is duty. Our mistress is honor. And you are the only sons we shall ever know.

“You have learned the words of the vow. Think carefully before you say them, for once you have taken the black, there is no turning back. The penalty for desertion is death.” The Old Bear