

father is bannerman to Lord Arryn. Uncle Benjen said they might search as far as the Shadow Tower. That's all the way up in the mountains."

"I hear that a good many rangers have vanished of late," Lannister said as they mounted the steps to the common hall. He grinned and pulled open the door. "Perhaps the grumkins are hungry this year."

Inside, the hall was immense and drafty, even with a fire roaring in its great hearth. Crows nested in the timbers of its lofty ceiling. Jon heard their cries overhead as he accepted a bowl of stew and a heel of black bread from the day's cooks. Grenn and Toad and some of the others were seated at the bench nearest the warmth, laughing and cursing each other in rough voices. Jon eyed them thoughtfully for a moment. Then he chose a spot at the far end of the hall, well away from the other diners.

Tyrion Lannister sat across from him, sniffing at the stew suspiciously. "Barley, onion, carrot," he muttered. "Someone should tell the cooks that turnip isn't a meat."

"It's mutton stew." Jon pulled off his gloves and warmed his hands in the steam rising from the bowl. The smell made his mouth water.

"Snow."

Jon knew Alliser Thorne's voice, but there was a curious note in it that he had not heard before. He turned.

"The Lord Commander wants to see you. Now."

For a moment Jon was too frightened to move. Why would the Lord Commander want to see him? They had heard something about Benjen, he thought wildly, he was dead, the vision had come true. "Is it my uncle?" he blurted. "Is he returned safe?"

"The Lord Commander is not accustomed to waiting," was Ser Alliser's reply. "And I am not accustomed to having my commands questioned by bastards."

Tyrion Lannister swung off the bench and rose. "Stop it, Thorne. You're frightening the boy."

"Keep out of matters that don't concern you, Lannister. You have no place here."

"I have a place at court, though," the dwarf said, smiling. "A word in the right ear, and you'll die a sour old man before you get another boy to train. Now tell Snow why the Old Bear needs to see him. Is there news of his uncle?"

"No," Ser Alliser said. "This is another matter entirely. A bird arrived this morning from Winterfell, with a message that concerns his brother." He corrected himself. "His half brother."

"Bran," Jon breathed, scrambling to his feet. "Something's happened to Bran."

Tyrion Lannister laid a hand on his arm. "Jon," he said. "I am truly sorry."

Jon scarcely heard him. He brushed off Tyrion's hand and strode across the hall. He was running by the time he hit the doors. He raced to the Commander's Keep, dashing through drifts of old snow. When the guards passed him, he took the tower steps two at a time. By the time he burst into the presence of the Lord Commander, his boots were soaked and Jon was wild-eyed and panting. "Bran," he said. "What does it say about Bran?"

Jeor Mormont, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, was a gruff old man with an immense bald head and a shaggy grey beard. He had a raven on his arm, and he was feeding it kernels of