

man's sword you have there, and it will take a man to wield her. I'll expect you to act the part, henceforth."

"Yes, my lord." Jon slid the sword back into the silver-banded scabbard. If not the blade he would have chosen, it was nonetheless a noble gift, and freeing him from Alliser Thorne's malignance was nobler still.

The Old Bear scratched at his chin. "I had forgotten how much a new beard itches," he said. "Well, no help for that. Is that hand of yours healed enough to resume your duties?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. The night will be cold, I'll want hot spice wine. Find me a flagon of red, not too sour, and don't skimp on the spices. And tell Hobb that if he sends me boiled mutton again I'm like to boil him. That last haunch was grey. Even the bird wouldn't touch it." He stroked the raven's head with his thumb, and the bird made a contented quorking sound. "Away with you. I've work to do."

The guards smiled at him from their niches as he wound his way down the turret stair, carrying the sword in his good hand. "Sweet steel," one man said. "You earned that, Snow," another told him. Jon made himself smile back at them, but his heart was not in it. He knew he should be pleased, yet he did not feel it. His hand ached, and the taste of anger was in his mouth, though he could not have said who he was angry with or why.

A half dozen of his friends were lurking outside when he left the King's Tower, where Lord Commander Mormont now made his residence. They'd hung a target on the granary doors, so they could seem to be honing their skills as archers, but he knew lurkers when he saw them. No sooner did he emerge than Pyp called out, "Well, come about, let's have a look."

"At what?" Jon said.

Toad sidled close. "Your rosy butt cheeks, what else?"

"The sword," Grenn stated. "We want to see the sword."

Jon raked them with an accusing look. "You knew."

Pyp grinned. "We're not all as dumb as Grenn."

"You are so," insisted Grenn. "You're dumber."

Halder gave an apologetic shrug. "I helped Pate carve the stone for the pommel," the builder said, "and your friend Sam bought the garnets in Mole's Town."

"We knew even before that, though," Grenn said. "Rudge has been helping Donal Noye in the forge. He was there when the Old Bear brought him the burnt blade."

"The sword!" Matt insisted. The others took up the chant. "The sword, the sword, the sword."

Jon unsheathed Longclaw and showed it to them, turning it this way and that so they could admire it. The bastard blade glittered in the pale sunlight, dark and deadly. "Valyrian steel," he declared solemnly, trying to sound as pleased and proud as he ought to have felt.

"I heard of a man who had a razor made of Valyrian steel," declared Toad. "He cut his head off trying to shave."

Pyp grinned. "The Night's Watch is thousands of years old," he said, "but I'll wager Lord Snow's the first brother ever honored for burning down the Lord Commander's Tower."