

A deep restlessness was on him as he went back to Hardin's Tower for Ghost. The direwolf walked beside him to the stables. Some of the more skittish horses kicked at their stalls and laid back their ears as they entered. Jon saddled his mare, mounted, and rode out from Castle Black, south across the moonlit night. Ghost raced ahead of him, flying over the ground, gone in the blink of an eye. Jon let him go. A wolf needed to hunt.

He had no destination in mind. He wanted only to ride. He followed the creek for a time, listening to the icy trickle of water over rock, then cut across the fields to the kingsroad. It stretched out before him, narrow and stony and pocked with weeds, a road of no particular promise, yet the sight of it filled Jon Snow with a vast longing. Winterfell was down that road, and beyond it Riverrun and King's Landing and the Eyrie and so many other places; Casterly Rock, the Isles of Faces, the red mountains of Dorne, the hundred islands of Braavos in the sea, the smoking ruins of old Valyria. All the places that Jon would never see. The world was down that road... and he was here.

Once he swore his vow, the Wall would be his home until he was old as Maester Aemon. "I have not sworn yet," he muttered. He was no outlaw, bound to take the black or pay the penalty for his crimes. He had come here freely, and he might leave freely... until he said the words. He need only ride on, and he could leave it all behind. By the time the moon was full again, he would be back in Winterfell with his brothers.

Your half brothers, a voice inside reminded him. And Lady Stark, who will not welcome you. There was no place for him in Winterfell, no place in King's Landing either. Even his own mother had not had a place for him. The thought of her made him sad. He wondered who she had been, what she had looked like, why his father had left her. Because she was a whore or an adulteress, fool. Something dark and dishonorable, or else why was Lord Eddard too ashamed to speak of her?

Jon Snow turned away from the kingsroad to look behind him. The fires of Castle Black were hidden behind a hill, but the Wall was there, pale beneath the moon, vast and cold, running from horizon to horizon.

He wheeled his horse around and started for home.

Ghost returned as he crested a rise and saw the distant glow of lamplight from the Lord Commander's Tower. The direwolf's muzzle was red with blood as he trotted beside the horse. Jon found himself thinking of Samwell Tarly again on the ride back. By the time he reached the stables, he knew what he must do.

Maester Aemon's apartments were in a stout wooden keep below the rookery. Aged and frail, the maester shared his chambers with two of the younger stewards, who tended to his needs and helped him in his duties. The brothers joked that he had been given the two ugliest men in the Night's Watch; being blind, he was spared having to look at them. Clydas was short, bald, and chinless, with small pink eyes like a mole. Chett had a wen on his neck the size of a pigeon's egg, and a face red with boils and pimples. Perhaps that was why he always seemed so angry.

It was Chett who answered Jon's knock. "I need to speak to Maester Aemon," Jon told him.