

Toad made a face. "I hope not. I'm sick of looking at those ears of yours."

"Ho," said Pyp. "Listen to the crow call the raven black. You're certain to be a ranger, Toad. They'll want you as far from the castle as they can. If Mance Rayder attacks, lift your visor and show your face, and he'll run off screaming."

Everyone laughed but Grenn. "I hope I'm a ranger."

"You and everyone else," said Matthar. Every man who wore the black walked the Wall, and every man was expected to take up steel in its defense, but the rangers were the true fighting heart of the Night's Watch. It was they who dared ride beyond the Wall, sweeping through the haunted forest and the icy mountain heights west of the Shadow Tower, fighting wildlings and giants and monstrous snow bears.

"Not everyone," said Halder. "It's the builders for me. What use would rangers be if the Wall fell down?"

The order of builders provided the masons and carpenters to repair keeps and towers, the miners to dig tunnels and crush stone for roads and footpaths, the woodsmen to clear away new growth wherever the forest pressed too close to the Wall. Once, it was said, they had quarried immense blocks of ice from frozen lakes deep in the haunted forest, dragging them south on sledges so the Wall might be raised ever higher. Those days were centuries gone, however; now, it was all they could do to ride the Wall from Eastwatch to the Shadow Tower, watching for cracks or signs of melt and making what repairs they could.

"The Old Bear's no fool," Dareon observed. "You're certain to be a builder, and Jon's certain to be a ranger. He's the best sword and the best rider among us, and his uncle was the First before he..." His voice trailed off awkwardly as he realized what he had almost said.

"Benjen Stark is still First Ranger," Jon Snow told him, toying with his bowl of blueberries. The rest might have given up all hope of his uncle's safe return, but not him. He pushed away the berries, scarcely touched, and rose from the bench.

"Aren't you going to eat those?" Toad asked.

"They're yours." Jon had hardly tasted Hobb's great feast. "I could not eat another bite." He took his cloak from its hook near the door and shouldered his way out.

Pyp followed him. "Jon, what is it?"

"Sam," he admitted. "He was not at table tonight."

"It's not like him to miss a meal," Pyp said thoughtfully. "Do you suppose he's taken ill?"

"He's frightened. We're leaving him." He remembered the day he had left Winterfell, all the bittersweet farewells; Bran lying broken, Robb with snow in his hair, Arya raining kisses on him after he'd given her Needle. "Once we say our words, we'll all have duties to attend to. Some of us may be sent away, to Eastwatch or the Shadow Tower. Sam will remain in training, with the likes of Rast and Cuger and these new boys who are coming up the kingsroad. Gods only know what they'll be like, but you can bet Ser Alliser will send them against him, first chance he gets."

Pyp made a grimace. "You did all you could."

"All we could wasn't enough," Jon said.