

The smell reached Karhold before the ship did.

Jon had stopped noticing it somewhere around the third day. A dead whale lashed to a hull did not improve with time, and the Grey Dawn had been dragging twenty feet of blubber and copper-smelling ruin through cold water for four days now. The crew worked around the stench...by complaining about it.

"You know what the worst part is?" Denys said, leaning on the rail beside him. "I'm going to miss it. A month from now I'll smell rotting fish somewhere and get sentimental."

"That's disgusting."

"That's sailing." Denys grinned.

Jon had Torrhen's journal open on his knee, the pages already fat with salt and thumbprints. He had done what Harrion asked. Every expense, every barrel of rendered oil, every hour of labor. He had done what Torrhen asked too, and that had been harder. The cleat failure. He had written it all in a plain hand, numbers and causes, because that was what the Iron Bank would want and because Torrhen had said the things that go wrong are the valuable part.

Then he had come to the place where he had to write Wendel's name, and he had sat with the quill hovering for a long time.

In the end he wrote: *Wendel of Whitewater. Lost on the hunt. The line took him. He was twenty-two.*

He looked at it for a while. It seemed like there should be more. There wasn't more. That was the whole terrible size of it, four short sentences, and Jon closed the journal and went to help with the sail.

It was Patrek who spotted the white rocks first. His shout came down from the crow's nest and the whole crew came up to look, and there they were: a line of brightness on the gray coast, shining like someone had spilled sunlight along the shore and it had frozen there.

"Told you," Jon said quietly, to no one.

"You did," Lord Karstark said, from directly behind him. "You said a ship could find White Shore from miles out. There's your proof, Jon Snow. You're navigating home by your own argument."

Someone began the Sea Song. Jon never learned who started it, only that within a verse the whole deck was singing, rough and off-key and loud enough to scare gulls, and Jon sang with them and understood, finally and completely, why sailors had two songs. The Sea Song was for going out, when everything was possibility. Leave Her, Johnny was for coming home, when you knew what the possibility had cost.

They would sing the second one soon enough. But not yet.

The crowd on the shore was three times the size of the one that had seen them off.

Jon saw them from half a mile out, a dark mass along the docks and the beach, and his stomach did something complicated. Word had traveled up the coast faster than the ship. A ship flying a whale banner, riding low, with something enormous lashed to her side. Every fishing boat that passed them in the last two days had turned around and raced for home like its stern was on fire.

When the Grey Dawn came close enough for the crowd to see the carcass clearly, the shore went silent.

It was the strangest thing Jon had ever heard, hundreds of people going quiet all at once. For three or four seconds there was nothing but water and wind and the creak of the hull.

Then the shore exploded.

Bells. Someone was ringing bells, and men were shouting, and Jon watched in disbelief as a dozen fishermen waded out into freezing shallows, fully clothed, just to put their hands on the whale as the ship came in. They touched it like it was a relic. One old man stood waist-deep, palm flat against the pale flank, and wept.

"They're mad," Jon said.

"Mad with hope, and you brought it to them," Tarran said with a smile.

And then the shouting resolved into words, and the words were his name.

Not Snow. Not the bastard, not Lord Stark's boy, not the lord's foster. *Jon*. Hundreds of voices, and Alys's banner snapping at the mast above it all, the white whale and the purple star, and the purple star was him, she had said so, and they were shouting his name.

His chest expanded like a sail catching wind. It felt like standing too close to a fire, and he knew he should step back from it, and he did not want to.

You shouldn't enjoy this so much, he told himself.

Alys was at the front of the crowd when the gangplank came down, and she did not wave with both hands this time. She stood very still. Her eyes went to his face, then to his neck, to the scarf, dark wool gone stiff with salt and marked along one edge with a brown stain that had been red once.

"You wore it," she said, when he reached her.

"You told me to come back. I was following instructions."

Alys's face brightened up like the sea in the first light of morning.

Behind her, Lady Maera stood with her sons. Her eyes moved along the rail of the Grey Dawn, crew member by crew member, counting.

He watched her come up one short. He watched her count again. He watched her face change.

She found her husband's eyes across the dock, and Lord Karstark shook his head, a small movement, and Lady Maera closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them and went on being the Lady of Karhold.

The celebration had a hole in it before it began. Jon was glad someone else could see it too.

.

.

"You don't have to come," Lord Karstark said. "This is a lord's duty. It's mine to carry."

They were standing at the head of the track that led down to Whitewater, where Wendel's mother lived, and behind them Karhold was already roaring with the beginnings of a feast that neither of them would attend for hours yet.

"My father has a saying," Jon said. "The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. I made the plan. I talked men onto that ship. That makes this mine to carry too."

Karstark looked at him for a long moment. A look his father had never given him.

"Your father is a great man, and his son might become a greater one."

Jon looked away to hide his eyes, and then the door opened.

Wendel's mother was a small woman named Sylla, and from her face, she knew before they said a word. She stood in her doorway with her hands folded and let them say it. Lord Karstark told her that her son died bravely, died for something great, and his sacrifice will not be forgotten.

She didn't scream. Jon had braced for screaming. She simply got smaller.

There was a girl behind her in the doorway, twelve or thirteen, Wendel's sister, and she was the one who cried.

When Lord Karstark had finished, Sylla looked up, and she looked at Jon, not at the lord. Perhaps because Jon was young enough to tell the truth.

"Was it quick?"

"Yes," he said. "It was very quick. He didn't suffer."

The first sentence was true and the second was probably true, and Sylla nodded and seemed to accept it, and Jon understood that he had just given her the only mercy that existed. It was a small, hard coin, but it was real, and she would keep it the rest of her life.

"Wendel's share of the venture comes to you," Lord Karstark said. "His full share, as if he'd sailed home with us. And his share of every voyage this ship makes after, for as long as you live."

The second part had been Jon's idea. He had brought it to Karstark on the ship, on the second day home, with Harrion's ledger lessons rearranging themselves in his head into something that wasn't commerce at all. *Every voyage after*. Karstark had listened, and said nothing for a while, and then said, "You're going to be an expensive foster son," in a voice that meant yes.

They walked back up the track in silence. Near the top, Karstark said, "You did well. With the mother."

"I lied to her a little."

"You gave her a floor to stand on. There's a difference, and you'll spend your whole life learning where the line sits." He glanced over. "Most men learn it at forty. You're doing it at thirteen. I don't know whether to be proud or frightened."

.

.

Jon dug the grave himself.

He chose the bluff above White Shore, where the ground looked out over the water and the white rocks caught the light below. A grave a ship could navigate home by.

The ground was half frozen and fought him for every spadeful. Denys came and stood nearby and offered, once, to take a turn, and Jon said no, and

Denys nodded and did not offer again. He simply stayed, hands in his pockets, watching the sea, and Jon understood that this was Denys's version of digging.

Two bastards burying a man the sea had kept. There was something in that too.

Sylla came up the bluff before he was halfway down, her daughter beside her, and Jon stopped digging when he saw them, suddenly unsure. He was standing in her son's grave with a spade. There was no proper thing to say from there.

Sylla looked at the hole, and at Jon's hands, and at the blisters already opening on them, and she didn't tell him to stop and she didn't offer to fetch a laborer. She simply took a few steps to the side, out of the wind, folded her hands, and stood, and her daughter stood with her, and they watched him dig.

That was worse than screaming would have been, and better, and Jon couldn't have said which by more. He put his head down and kept working, and after a while the girl came forward without a word and began clearing the loose stones from the pile of turned earth, sorting them to one side with cold-reddened hands.

He kept digging. The work hurt and he was glad it hurt. It felt like the first honest payment he'd made on a debt he'd been carrying since the rope whipped across the deck, and he made it in full view of the two people it was owed to.

Tarran arrived when the grave was nearly done, carrying a wooden box under his arm and, coiled over his shoulder, a length of rope.

Jon looked at the rope and understood, and felt his stomach turn over. He glanced at Sylla. Her eyes had found the rope too, and her face had gone very still, and she gave one small nod, permission, before Jon could think of how to ask.

"That's the one?"

"Cut from the same line." Tarran set the box down. "It's an old custom. The sea takes a man with a tool, you bury the tool. The line, the net, the harpoon, whatever it was. You put it in the ground so it can't take anyone else." He shrugged. "Some say it's for the dead man's rest. I say it's for the living men's sleep. Works either way."

Into the box went Wendel's few things from his sea chest: a bone comb, a whetstone, a lucky copper he'd shown everyone twice, a shirt his mother had made. Sylla's composure held through the comb and the whetstone and the copper, and broke, quietly, at the shirt. Her daughter took her hand. The rope went in last, coiled neat, and Jon looked at it lying there tame in a wooden box and thought about how it had moved that day, and shut the lid.

The rest of the crew came as the light lowered, all eleven of them, and Lord Karstark, and to Jon's surprise perhaps forty people from the villages besides, come to stand in the cold for a man most had never met, because he had died doing the thing that was going to change all their lives.

Jon had carved the marker stone himself, or rather he had paid Karhold's mason and then hovered so anxiously that the mason finally handed him the chisel for the last line and stood back with his arms folded, muttering about lordlings. The stone said:

*WENDEL OF WHITEWATER
HE SAILED FIRST*

Sylla read it, and read it again, and reached out and touched the letters with two fingers, the way the fishermen had touched the whale.

Patrek stepped up when the box was in the ground.

"The sea kept him," Patrek said. "That's the sea's right. It's old and it takes what it takes and it doesn't answer to us. So we give the land his name instead, and the land holds names longer than the sea holds anything." He looked at the stone, and then at Sylla. "Every boy in these villages who sails after a whale from now till the world ends, sails after Wendel. First is first. Nobody takes it off him."

Then Olyvar, who Jon had heard speak perhaps thirty words in a month, began to sing Leave Her, Johnny.

The coming-home song. For the man who hadn't.

The crew took it up soft, verse by verse, and the crowd who didn't know the words hummed, and Jon sang until his voice stopped working, somewhere in the fourth verse, and mouthed the rest. Beside him Denys wasn't singing at all, just standing with his jaw tight and his eyes bright, and when the last verse dropped to a murmur and dissolved, he let out a breath that shook on the way out.

"He'd hate this," Denys said quietly. "All this fuss. He'd be unbearable about it. 'Did they cry? Who cried? Rank them.'"

Jon laughed, horribly, at a graveside, and it turned into something that wasn't quite laughing, and Denys gripped the back of his neck once, the way he had on the ship, and let go.

They filled the grave in together. That part, Jon allowed help with, and the first spadeful of earth was Sylla's, because Tarran handed her the spade before anyone else could reach for it, and nobody in forty people made a sound while she used it.

Before she left, she stopped in front of Jon. She didn't say thank you, and he was grateful for that, because he could not have borne it. She only looked at his ruined hands for a moment and said, "My boy is gone, I can never kiss his cheek again, I can never tell him not to be reckless, he became reckless, and he is gone now. He will never return to me, and he can never mess his sister's hair ever again...but I like to believe his death, will bring more food to this place, and more warmth to everyone else, and perhaps one day, I will feel his warmth again, if only just a little."

Jon was silent as she walked away, helped by her daughter.

.

.

The great hall of Karhold that night was the loudest place Jon had ever been, and he had lived through a Greatjon Umber feast.

The whale was already becoming money. That was the miracle nobody on the benches quite believed yet. The rendering fires had been burning on the shore since the second hour after landfall, and the first barrels of oil had been tested, and Harrion had spent the entire afternoon with samples and a lamp and a sand-glass, timing the burn, and had come to dinner looking like a man who had witnessed a miracle.

"Cleaner than anything in the records," he told Jon, sliding onto the bench uninvited. "Longer burn than standard oil by half again. Jon. *Jon*. At Pentoshi

prices, this one animal, this single juvenile, covers the entire cost of the voyage, the crew's shares, Wendel's family's share, and clears profit on top."

"How much profit?"

Harrion told him.

Jon put down his cup. "Say it again."

"I know," Harrion said. "I've said it to myself forty times today. It doesn't get smaller."

"It's a good number," said Torrhen, appearing at Jon's other side with the journal Jon had returned to him that afternoon, now bristling with markers.

"But I have questions. I have," he consulted a list, an actual written list, "thirty-one questions."

"Torrhen."

"You promised. Chapter and verse, you promised. Every detail." He held the quill like a drawn blade. "Start with the eye. You wrote 'the throw was clean.' That's three words for the most important moment of your life. Expand."

So Jon told him. The eye, dark and enormous, looking at the falling snow. The scream that had come up through the deck and into his teeth, that he still felt sometimes when the hall went quiet. Torrhen wrote it all down, and only stopped once, at the scream, to look up and say, quietly, "It cried out," not as a question, and Jon said, "Yes," and Torrhen looked at his page for a moment before he kept writing.

Three seats down, Arthor was performing.

"...and the beast rose from the deep like a MOUNTAIN," Arthor announced to a rapt cluster of serving girls and off-duty guards, "and Snow, our Snow, looked death in its terrible eye, and he LEAPT onto the whale's back with a harpoon in each hand..."

"I didn't," Jon called down the table.

"Shut up, it's better my way. WITH A HARPOON IN EACH HAND..."

"Tomorrow," Edd said, dropping onto the bench across from Jon and pointing at him with a chicken leg. "Training yard. First light. You promised, and I've been imagining it for a month, and if the sea has made you soft I want to find out before the story gets any bigger, because Arthor has you fighting the whale hand to hand by now and I refuse to lose a sparring match to a legend."

"First light is cruel."

"First light is the *agreement*."

One Week Later

The messages had started arriving before sunset. That was the thing Jon kept turning over, between conversations, like a stone in his pocket. Ravens. Riders. A letter from Lord Manderly's steward, exquisitely polite, requesting information about oil quantities, which Harrion had read aloud in a dry voice and then said, "They're nervous. Good."

And a raven from Last Hearth that was less a letter than a roar transcribed. The Greatjon's maester had clearly taken dictation under protest. It read, in its entirety:

*KNEW YOU HAD STEEL SNOW. FIRST WHALE IN NORTHERN WATERS
AND IT WAS NED'S BOY. TOLD EVERYONE. TELLING MORE PEOPLE
TOMORROW. COME NORTH AND DRINK. BRING THE BORING BOOKS IF
YOU MUST.*

His name was traveling. That was the fact underneath all the noise. His name was moving up the coast and across the North faster than he could ever ride, into halls he'd never entered, spoken by lords who had never seen his face. Somewhere tonight, in Last Hearth and White Harbor and a dozen holdfasts between, men were saying *Jon Snow* and meaning something new by it.

Grizzled sailors kept coming to the high table. Men of forty and fifty years, standing in front of a boy of thirteen, asking his opinion on hull designs and crew shares and next season. One of them, deep in his cups, called him "the whale lord," and the men around him laughed, and then somewhere in the third hour of the feast Jon heard it again from across the hall, and nobody was laughing that time. It was just what they were calling him.

And then Lord Karstark stood, and the hall quieted, and he raised his cup.

"You all know what I'm going to say," Karstark said. "So I'll keep it short, because the beer is good and I want to get back to it. A year ago, that coast down there was what it had been for a thousand years. Fishing boats and cold water. Tonight there's a whale on our shore worth more than a season of timber, and a banner on a ship that never existed before, and every one of you knows whose idea it was." He turned. "Jon Snow. Stand up, boy, they can't drink to the top of your head."

Jon stood, face burning.

And the hall stood with him.

All of it. Benches scraping back, hundreds of people rising, cups lifting, and the roar that followed had his name in it, and Jon stood in the middle of it and felt...strange...he felt a fire burning in his chest.

They are not calling me, Snow.

Not one person in this hall, in this roaring standing crowd, was thinking about what his name declared, or which side of a marriage bed he'd been made on. They were thinking about the whale. The oil. The banner. The thing he had *done*.

And it felt better than warmth. Better than wine. It felt better than anything he had a comparison for, and he stood there letting it pour over him and made no effort at all to step back from the fire.

*He had never felt this **good** in his life.*

Later, she appeared on his elbow. Alys.

She appeared at his elbow in the fourth hour, when the feast had gone loose and loud and nobody was tracking anybody, and said, "Walk me up. Teacher Jynessa surrendered an hour ago, she's asleep in her chair."

They went up through the quieting keep, torchlight and their own footsteps, and Jon told her about the crow's nest and she told him about the month, and at the top of the stairs she stopped outside her chamber door and turned, and her fingers found the end of the scarf.

"You wore it the whole time," she said. "The whole voyage."

"It's ruined, you know," Jon said. "It's got salt in it. And whale blood. It's stiff as a board on this side. It's completely ruined."

"It's perfect," Alys said.

Jon smiled.

"I watched from the tower," she said. "The northwest one. Our tower." Her chin came up slightly. "Every day. Teacher Jynessa thought I'd developed a devotion to prayer. I let her think it. I watched the horizon every single day, Jon Snow, and I want you to know that the horizon is extremely boring, and I resent every hour of it, and I'd do it again."

"Alys."

"Just shut up for a moment." Her hand had found his somewhere in the middle of all that, warm fingers, and they stood in the torchlight with a foot of air between them.

Then the foot of air between them was gone.

She came up on her toes and kissed him. It was quick and soft and landed slightly off-center before it found its mark, her nose bumping his on the way, and it lasted perhaps two seconds altogether, and in those two seconds Jon Snow forgot the whale, the feast, and very nearly his own name.

She dropped back onto her heels. Her face was scarlet in the torchlight. His felt worse.

Neither of them said anything. Alys squeezed his hand once, hard, the way she had at the tower top, at the dock, at every door and departure between them. Then she let go, slipped inside her chamber, and the door clicked shut.

And through the wood, one second later, Jon heard her laugh. Once. Bright and delighted and disbelieving, muffled by the door, entirely for herself, not meant to be heard.

He stood in the corridor for what was an embarrassing length of time. Then he made his legs remember their business and carried himself off toward the north tower, grinning at absolutely nothing the whole way.

Bigger than the whale, he thought, climbing the stairs to his bedchamber. *That was bigger than the whale*.

The Pace of the Story will quicken up a bit after this Chapter

