



JON

Jon prowled around Satin in a slow circle, sword in hand, forcing him to turn. “Get your shield up,” he said.

“It’s too heavy,” the Oldtown boy complained.

“It’s as heavy as it needs to be to stop a sword,” Jon said. “Now get it up.” He stepped forward, slashing. Satin jerked the shield up in time to catch the sword on its rim, and swung his own blade at Jon’s ribs. “Good,” Jon said, when he felt the impact on his own shield. “That was good. But you need to put your body into it. Get your weight behind the steel and you’ll do more damage than with arm strength alone. Come, try it again, drive at me, but keep the shield up or I’ll ring your head like a bell . . .”

Instead Satin took a step backward and raised his visor. “Jon,” he said, in an anxious voice.

When he turned, she was standing behind him, with half a dozen queen’s men around her. *Small wonder the yard grew so quiet.* He had glimpsed Melisandre at her nightfires, and coming and going about the castle, but never so close. *She’s beautiful,* he thought . . . but there was something more than a little unsettling about red eyes. “My lady.”

“The king would speak with you, Jon Snow.”

Jon thrust the practice sword into the earth. “Might I be allowed to change? I am in no fit state to stand before a king.”

“We shall await you atop the Wall,” said Melisandre. *We*, Jon heard, *not* *he*. *It’s as they say. This is his true queen, not the one he left at Eastwatch.*

He hung his mail and plate inside the armory, returned to his own cell, discarded his sweat-stained clothes, and donned a fresh set of blacks. It would be cold and windy in the cage, he knew, and colder and windier still on top of the ice, so he chose a heavy hooded cloak. Last of all he collected Longclaw, and slung the bastard sword across his back.

Melisandre was waiting for him at the base of the Wall. She had sent her queen’s men away. “What does His Grace want of me?” Jon asked her as they entered the cage.

“All you have to give, Jon Snow. He is a king.”

He shut the door and pulled the bell cord. The winch began to turn. They rose. The day was bright and the Wall was weeping, long fingers of water trickling down its face and glinting in the sun. In the close confines of the iron cage, he was acutely aware of the red woman’s presence. *She even smells red*. The scent reminded him of Mikken’s forge, of the way iron smelled when red-hot; the scent was smoke and blood. *Kissed by fire*, he thought, remembering Ygritte. The wind got in amongst Melisandre’s long red robes and sent them flapping against Jon’s legs as he stood beside her. “You are not cold, my lady?” he asked her.

She laughed. “Never.” The ruby at her throat seemed to pulse, in time with the beating of her heart. “The Lord’s fire lives within me, Jon Snow. Feel.” She put her hand on his cheek, and held it there while he felt how warm she was. “That is how life should feel,” she told him. “Only death is cold.”

They found Stannis Baratheon standing alone at the edge of the Wall, brooding over the field where he had won his battle, and the great green forest beyond. He was dressed in the same black breeches, tunic, and boots that a brother of the Night’s Watch might wear. Only his cloak set him apart; a heavy golden cloak trimmed in black fur, and pinned with a brooch in the shape of a flaming heart. “I have brought you the Bastard of Winterfell, Your Grace,” said Melisandre.

Stannis turned to study him. Beneath his heavy brow were eyes like bottomless blue pools. His hollow cheeks and strong jaw were covered with

a short-cropped blue-black beard that did little to conceal the gauntness of his face, and his teeth were clenched. His neck and shoulders were clenched as well, and his right hand. Jon found himself remembering something Donal Noye once said about the Baratheon brothers. *Robert was the true steel. Stannis is pure iron, black and hard and strong, but brittle, the way iron gets. He'll break before he bends.* Uneasily, he knelt, wondering why this brittle king had need of him.

“Rise. I have heard much and more of you, Lord Snow.”

“I am no lord, sire.” Jon rose. “I know what you have heard. That I am a turncloak, and craven. That I slew my brother Qhorin Halfhand so the wildlings would spare my life. That I rode with Mance Rayder, and took a wildling wife.”

“Aye. All that, and more. You are a warg too, they say, a skinchanger who walks at night as a wolf.” King Stannis had a hard smile. “How much of it is true?”

“I had a direwolf, Ghost. I left him when I climbed the Wall near Greyguard, and have not seen him since. Qhorin Halfhand commanded me to join the wildlings. He knew they would make me kill him to prove myself, and told me to do whatever they asked of me. The woman was named Ygritte. I broke my vows with her, but I swear to you on my father’s name that I never turned my cloak.”

“I believe you,” the king said.

That startled him. “Why?”

Stannis snorted. “I know Janos Slynt. And I knew Ned Stark as well. Your father was no friend of mine, but only a fool would doubt his honor or his honesty. You have his look.” A big man, Stannis Baratheon towered over Jon, but he was so gaunt that he looked ten years older than he was. “I know more than you might think, Jon Snow. I know it was you who found the dragonglass dagger that Randyll Tarly’s son used to slay the Other.”

“Ghost found it. The blade was wrapped in a ranger’s cloak and buried beneath the Fist of the First Men. There were other blades as well . . . spearheads, arrowheads, all dragonglass.”

“I know you held the gate here,” King Stannis said. “If not, I would have come too late.”

“Donal Noye held the gate. He died below in the tunnel, fighting the king of the giants.”

Stannis grimaced. “Noye made my first sword for me, and Robert’s warhammer as well. Had the god seen fit to spare him, he would have made a better Lord Commander for your order than any of these fools who are squabbling over it now.”

“Cotter Pyke and Ser Denys Mallister are no fools, sire,” Jon said. “They’re good men, and capable. Othell Yarwyck as well, in his own way. Lord Mormont trusted each of them.”

“Your Lord Mormont trusted too easily. Else he would not have died as he did. But we were speaking of you. I have not forgotten that it was you who brought us this magic horn, and captured Mance Rayder’s wife and son.”

“Dalla died.” Jon was saddened by that still. “Val is her sister. She and the babe did not require much capturing, Your Grace. You had put the wildlings to flight, and the skinchanger Mance had left to guard his queen went mad when the eagle burned.” Jon looked at Melisandre. “Some say that was your doing.”

She smiled, her long copper hair tumbling across her face. “The Lord of Light has fiery talons, Jon Snow.”

Jon nodded, and turned back to the king. “Your Grace, you spoke of Val. She has asked to see Mance Rayder, to bring his son to him. It would be a . . . a kindness.”

“The man is a deserter from your order. Your brothers are all insisting on his death. Why should I do him a kindness?”

Jon had no answer for that. “If not for him, for Val. For her sister’s sake, the child’s mother.”

“You are fond of this Val?”

“I scarcely know her.”

“They tell me she is comely.”

“Very,” Jon admitted.

“Beauty can be treacherous. My brother learned that lesson from Cersei Lannister. She murdered him, do not doubt it. Your father and Jon Arryn as well.” He scowled. “You rode with these wildlings. Is there any honor in them, do you think?”

“Yes,” Jon said, “but their own sort of honor, sire.”

“In Mance Rayder?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“In the Lord of Bones?”

Jon hesitated. “Rattleshirt, we called him. Treacherous and blood-thirsty. If there’s honor in him, he hides it down beneath his suit of bones.”

“And this other man, this Tormund of the many names who eluded us after the battle? Answer me truly.”

“Tormund Giantsbane seemed to me the sort of man who would make a good friend and a bad enemy, Your Grace.”

Stannis gave a curt nod. “Your father was a man of honor. He was no friend to me, but I saw his worth. Your brother was a rebel and a traitor who meant to steal half my kingdom, but no man can question his courage. What of you?”

Does he want me to say I love him? Jon’s voice was stiff and formal as he said, “I am a man of the Night’s Watch.”

“Words. Words are wind. Why do you think I abandoned Dragonstone and sailed to the Wall, Lord Snow?”

“I am no lord, sire. You came because we sent for you, I hope. Though I could not say why you took so long about it.”

Surprisingly, Stannis smiled at that. “You’re bold enough to be a Stark. Yes, I should have come sooner. If not for my Hand, I might not have come at all. Lord Seaworth is a man of humble birth, but he reminded me of my duty, when all I could think of was my rights. I had the cart before the horse, Davos said. I was trying to win the throne to save the kingdom, when I should have been trying to save the kingdom to win the throne.” Stannis pointed north. “There is where I’ll find the foe that I was born to fight.”

“His name may not be spoken,” Melisandre added softly. “He is the God of Night and Terror, Jon Snow, and these shapes in the snow are his creatures.”

“They tell me that you slew one of these walking corpses to save Lord Mormont’s life,” Stannis said. “It may be that this is your war as well, Lord Snow. If you will give me your help.”

“My sword is pledged to the Night’s Watch, Your Grace,” Jon Snow answered carefully.

That did not please the king. Stannis ground his teeth and said, “I need more than a sword from you.”

Jon was lost. “My lord?”

“I need the north.”

The north. “I . . . my brother Robb was King in the North . . .”

“Your brother was the rightful Lord of Winterfell. If he had stayed home and done his duty, instead of crowning himself and riding off to conquer the riverlands, he might be alive today. Be that as it may. You are not Robb, no more than I am Robert.”

The harsh words had blown away whatever sympathy Jon might have had for Stannis. “I loved my brother,” he said.

“And I mine. Yet they were what they were, and so are we. I am the only true king in Westeros, north or south. And you are Ned Stark’s bastard.” Stannis studied him with those dark blue eyes. “Tywin Lannister has named Roose Bolton his Warden of the North, to reward him for betraying your brother. The ironmen are fighting amongst themselves since Balon Greyjoy’s death, yet they still hold Moat Cailin, Deepwood Motte, Torrhen’s Square, and most of the Stony Shore. Your father’s lands are bleeding, and I have neither the strength nor the time to stanch the wounds. What is needed is a Lord of Winterfell. A *loyal* Lord of Winterfell.”

He is looking at me, Jon thought, stunned. “Winterfell is no more. Theon Greyjoy put it to the torch.”

“Granite does not burn easily,” Stannis said. “The castle can be rebuilt, in time. It’s not the walls that make a lord, it’s the man. Your northmen do not know me, have no reason to love me, yet I will need their strength in the

battles yet to come. I need a son of Eddard Stark to win them to my banner.”

He would make me Lord of Winterfell. The wind was gusting, and Jon felt so light-headed he was half afraid it would blow him off the Wall. “Your Grace,” he said, “you forget. I am a Snow, not a Stark.”

“It’s you who are forgetting,” King Stannis replied.

Melisandre put a warm hand on Jon’s arm. “A king can remove the taint of bastardy with a stroke, Lord Snow.”

Lord Snow. Ser Alliser Thorne had named him that, to mock his bastard birth. Many of his brothers had taken to using it as well, some with affection, others to wound. But suddenly it had a different sound to it in Jon’s ears. It sounded . . . real. “Yes,” he said, hesitantly, “kings have legitimized bastards before, but . . . I am still a brother of the Night’s Watch. I knelt before a heart tree and swore to hold no lands and father no children.”

“Jon.” Melisandre was so close he could feel the warmth of her breath. “R’hllor is the only true god. A vow sworn to a tree has no more power than one sworn to your shoes. Open your heart and let the light of the Lord come in. Burn these weirwoods, and accept Winterfell as a gift of the Lord of Light.”

When Jon had been very young, too young to understand what it meant to be a bastard, he used to dream that one day Winterfell might be his. Later, when he was older, he had been ashamed of those dreams. Winterfell would go to Robb and then his sons, or to Bran or Rickon should Robb die childless. And after them came Sansa and Arya. Even to dream otherwise seemed disloyal, as if he were betraying them in his heart, wishing for their deaths. *I never wanted this*, he thought as he stood before the blue-eyed king and the red woman. *I loved Robb, loved all of them . . . I never wanted any harm to come to any of them, but it did. And now there’s only me.* All he had to do was say the word, and he would be Jon Stark, and nevermore a Snow. All he had to do was pledge this king his fealty, and Winterfell was his. All he had to do . . .

. . . was forswear his vows again.

And this time it would not be a ruse. To claim his father's castle, he must turn against his father's gods.

King Stannis gazed off north again, his gold cloak streaming from his shoulders. "It may be that I am mistaken in you, Jon Snow. We both know the things that are said of bastards. You may lack your father's honor, or your brother's skill in arms. But you are the weapon the Lord has given me. I have found you here, as you found the cache of dragonglass beneath the Fist, and I mean to make use of you. Even Azor Ahai did not win his war alone. I killed a thousand wildlings, took another thousand captive, and scattered the rest, but we both know they will return. Melisandre has seen that in her fires. This Tormund Thunderfist is likely re-forming them even now, and planning some new assault. And the more we bleed each other, the weaker we shall all be when the real enemy falls upon us."

Jon had come to that same realization. "As you say, Your Grace." He wondered where this king, was going.

"Whilst your brothers have been struggling to decide who shall lead them, I have been speaking with this Mance Rayder." He ground his teeth. "A stubborn man, that one, and prideful. He will leave me no choice but to give him to the flames. But we took other captives as well, other leaders. The one who calls himself the Lord of Bones, some of their clan chiefs, the new Magnar of Thenn. Your brothers will not like it, no more than your father's lords, but I mean to allow the wildlings through the Wall . . . those who will swear me their fealty, pledge to keep the king's peace and the king's laws, and take the Lord of Light as their god. Even the giants, if those great knees of theirs can bend. I will settle them on the Gift, once I have wrested it away from your new Lord Commander. When the cold winds rise, we shall live or die together. It is time we made alliance against our common foe." He looked at Jon. "Would you agree?"

"My father dreamed of resettling the Gift," Jon admitted. "He and my uncle Benjen used to talk of it." *He never thought of settling it with wildlings, though . . . but he never rode with wildlings, either.* He did not fool himself; the free folk would make for unruly subjects and dangerous neighbors. Yet when he weighed Ygritte's red hair against the cold blue eyes of the wights, the choice was easy. "I agree."

“Good,” King Stannis said, “for the surest way to seal a new alliance is with a marriage. I mean to wed my Lord of Winterfell to this wildling princess.”

Perhaps Jon had ridden with the free folk too long; he could not help but laugh. “Your Grace,” he said, “captive or no, if you think you can just *give* Val to me, I fear you have a deal to learn about wildling women. Whoever weds her had best be prepared to climb in her tower window and carry her off at swordpoint . . .”

“*Whoever?*” Stannis gave him a measuring look. “Does this mean you will not wed the girl? I warn you, she is part of the price you must pay, if you want your father’s name and your father’s castle. This match is necessary, to help assure the loyalty of our new subjects. Are you refusing me, Jon Snow?”

“No,” Jon said, too quickly. It was Winterfell the king was speaking of, and Winterfell was not to be lightly refused. “I mean . . . this has all come very suddenly, Your Grace. Might I beg you for some time to consider?”

“As you wish. But consider quickly. I am not a patient man, as your black brothers are about to discover.” Stannis put a thin, fleshless hand on Jon’s shoulder. “Say nothing of what we’ve discussed here today. To anyone. But when you return, you need only bend your knee, lay your sword at my feet, and pledge yourself to my service, and you shall rise again as Jon Stark, the Lord of Winterfell.”