

JON

When he heard the order, Ser Alliser's mouth twisted into a semblance of a smile, but his eyes remained as cold and hard as flint. "So the bastard boy sends me out to die."

"*Die*," cried Mormont's raven. "*Die, die, die*."

You are not helping. Jon swatted the bird away. "The bastard boy is sending you out to range. To find our foes and kill them if need be. You are skilled with a blade. You were master-at-arms, here and at Eastwatch."

Thorne touched the hilt of his longsword. "Aye. I have squandered a third of my life trying to teach the rudiments of swordplay to churls, muttonheads, and knaves. Small good that will do me in those woods."

"Dywen will be with you, and another seasoned ranger."

"We'll learn you what you need t' know, ser," Dywen told Thorne, cackling. "Teach you how t' wipe your highborn arse with leaves, just like a proper ranger."

Kedge Whiteye laughed at that, and Black Jack Bulwer spat. Ser Alliser only said, "You would like me to refuse. Then you could hack off my head, same as you did for Slynt. I'll not give you that pleasure, bastard. You'd best pray that it's a wildling blade that kills me, though. The ones the Others kill don't stay dead ... and they *remember*. I'm coming back, Lord Snow."

"I pray you do." Jon would never count Ser Alliser Thorne amongst his friends, but he was still a brother. *No one ever said you had to like your brothers.*

It was no easy thing to send men into the wild, knowing that the chances were good that they might never return. *They are all seasoned men*, Jon told himself ... but his uncle Benjen and his rangers had been seasoned men as well, and the haunted forest had swallowed them up without a trace. When

two of them finally came straggling back to the Wall, it had been as wights. Not for the first time, or the last, Jon Snow found himself wondering what had become of Benjen Stark. *Perhaps the rangers will come upon some sign of them*, he told himself, never truly believing it.

Dywen would lead one ranging, Black Jack Bulwer and Kedge Whit-eye the other two. They at least were eager for the duty. “Feels good to have a horse under me again,” Dywen said at the gate, sucking on his wooden teeth. “Begging your pardon, m’lord, but we were all o’ us getting splinters up our arses from sitting about.” No man in Castle Black knew the woods as well as Dywen did, the trees and streams, the plants that could be eaten, the ways of predator and prey. *Thorne is in better hands than he deserves*.

Jon watched the riders go from atop the Wall—three parties, each of three men, each carrying a pair of ravens. From on high their garrons looked no larger than ants, and Jon could not tell one ranger from another. He knew them, though. Every name was graven on his heart. *Eight good men*, he thought, *and one ... well, we shall see*.

When the last of the riders had disappeared into the trees, Jon Snow rode the winch cage down with Dolorous Edd. A few scattered snowflakes were falling as they made their slow descent, dancing on the gusty wind. One followed the cage down, drifting just beyond the bars. It was falling faster than they were descending and from time to time would vanish beneath them. Then a gust of wind would catch it and push it upward once again. Jon could have reached through the bars and caught it if he had wished.

“I had a frightening dream last night, m’lord,” Dolorous Edd confessed. “You were my steward, fetching my food and cleaning up my leavings. I was lord commander, with never a moment’s peace.”

Jon did not smile. “Your nightmare, my life.”

Cotter Pyke’s galleys were reporting ever-increasing numbers of free folk along the wooded shores to the north and east of the Wall. Camps had been seen, half-built rafts, even the hull of a broken cog that someone had begun repairing. The wildlings always vanished into the woods when seen, no doubt to reemerge as soon as Pyke’s ships had passed. Meanwhile, Ser

Denys Mallister was still seeing fires in the night north of the Gorge. Both commanders were asking for more men.

And where am I to get more men? Jon had sent ten of the Mole's Town wildlings to each of them: green boys, old men, some wounded and infirm, but all capable of doing work of one sort or another. Far from being pleased, Pyke and Mallister had both written back to complain. "When I asked for men, I had in mind men of the Night's Watch, trained and disciplined, whose loyalty I should never have reason to doubt," wrote Ser Denys. Cotter Pyke was blunter. "I could hang them from the Wall as a warning to other wildlings to stay away, but I don't see any other use for them," Maester Harmune wrote for him. "I wouldn't trust such to clean my chamber pot, and *ten is not enough.*"

The iron cage moved downward at the end of its long chain, creaking and rattling, until it finally jerked to a halt a foot above the ground at the base of the Wall. Dolorous Edd pushed open the door and hopped down, his boots breaking the crust of the last snow. Jon followed.

Outside the armory, Iron Emmett was still urging on his charges in the yard. The song of steel on steel woke a hunger in Jon. It reminded him of warmer, simpler days, when he had been a boy at Winterfell matching blades with Robb under the watchful eye of Ser Rodrik Cassel. Ser Rodrik too had fallen, slain by Theon Turncloak and his ironmen as he'd tried to retake Winterfell. The great stronghold of House Stark was a scorched desolation. *All my memories are poisoned.*

When Iron Emmett spied him, he raised a hand and combat ceased. "Lord Commander. How may we serve you?"

"With your three best."

Emmett grinned. "Arron. Emrick. Jace."

Horse and Hop-Robin fetched padding for the lord commander, along with a ringmail hauberk to go over it, and greaves, gorget, and halfhelm. A black shield rimmed with iron for his left arm, a blunted longsword for his right hand. The sword gleamed silvery grey in the dawn light, almost new. *One*

of the last to come from Donal's forge. A pity he did not live long enough to put an edge on it. The blade was shorter than Longclaw but made of common steel, which made it heavier. His blows would be a little slower. "It will serve." Jon turned to face his foes. "Come."

"Which one do you want first?" asked Arron. "All three of you. At once."

"Three on one?" Jace was incredulous. "That wouldn't be fair." He was one of Conwy's latest bunch, a cobbler's son from Fair Isle. Maybe that explained it.

"True. Come here."

When he did, Jon's blade slammed him alongside his head, knocking him off his feet. In the blink of an eye the boy had a boot on his chest and a swordpoint at his throat. "War is never fair," Jon told him. "It's two on one now, and you're dead."

When he heard gravel crunch, he knew the twins were coming. *Those two will make rangers yet.* He spun, blocking Arron's cut with the edge of his shield and meeting Emrick's with his sword. "Those aren't spears," he shouted. "Get in close." He went to the attack to show them how it was done. Emrick first. He slashed at his head and shoulders, right and left and right again. The boy got his shield up and tried a clumsy countercut. Jon slammed his own shield into Emrick's, and brought him down with a blow to the lower leg ... none too soon, because Arron was on him, with a crunching cut to the back of his thigh that sent him to one knee. *That will leave a bruise.* He caught the next cut on his shield, then lurched back to his feet and drove Arron across the yard. *He's quick,* he thought, as the longswords kissed once and twice and thrice, *but he needs to get stronger.* When he saw relief in Arron's eyes, he knew Emrick was behind him. He came around and dealt him a cut to the back of the shoulders that sent him crashing into his brother. By that time Jace had found his feet, so Jon put him down again. "I hate it when dead men get up. You'll feel the same the day you meet a wight." Stepping back, he lowered his sword.

"The big crow can peck the little crows," growled a voice behind him, "but has he belly enough to fight a man?"

Rattleshirt was leaning against a wall. A coarse stubble covered his sunken cheeks, and thin brown hair was blowing across his little yellow eyes.

“You flatter yourself,” Jon said. “Aye, but I’d flatten you.”

“Stannis burned the wrong man.”

“No.” The wildling grinned at him through a mouth of brown and broken teeth. “He burned the man he had to burn, for all the world to see. We all do what we have to do, Snow. Even kings.”

“Emmett, find some armor for him. I want him in steel, not old bones.” Once clad in mail and plate, the Lord of Bones seemed to stand a little straighter. He seemed taller too, his shoulders thicker and more powerful than Jon would have thought. *It’s the armor, not the man*, he told himself. *Even Sam could appear almost formidable, clad head to heel in Donal Noye’s steel.* The wildling waved away the shield Horse offered him. Instead he asked for a two-handed sword. “There’s a sweet sound,” he said, slashing at the air. “Flap closer, Snow. I mean to make your feathers fly.”

Jon rushed him hard.

Rattleshirt took a step backwards and met the charge with a two-handed slash. If Jon had not interposed his shield, it might have staved his breastplate in and broken half his ribs. The force of the blow staggered him for a moment and sent a solid jolt up his arm. *He hits harder than I would have thought.* His quickness was another unpleasant surprise. They circled round each other, trading blow for blow. The Lord of Bones gave as good as he was getting. By rights the two-handed greatsword should have been a deal more cumbersome than Jon’s longsword, but the wildling wielded it with blinding speed.

Iron Emmett’s fledglings cheered their lord commander at the start, but the relentless speed of Rattleshirt’s attack soon beat them down to silence. *He cannot keep this up for long*, Jon told himself as he stopped another blow. The impact made him grunt. Even dulled, the greatsword cracked his pinewood shield and bent the iron rim. *He will tire soon. He must.* Jon slashed at the wildling’s face, and Rattleshirt pulled back his head. He

hacked down at Rattleshirt's calf, only to have him deftly leap the blade. The greatsword crashed down onto Jon's shoulder, hard enough to ding his pouldron and numb the arm beneath. Jon backed away. The Lord of Bones came after, chortling. *He has no shield*, Jon reminded himself, *and that monster sword's too cumbersome for parries. I should be landing two blows for every one of his.*

Somehow he wasn't, though, and the blows he did land were having no effect. The wildling always seemed to be moving away or sliding sideways, so Jon's longsword glanced off a shoulder or an arm. Before long he found himself giving more ground, trying to avoid the other's crashing cuts and failing half the time. His shield had been reduced to kindling. He shook it off his arm. Sweat was running down his face and stinging his eyes beneath his helm. *He is too strong and too quick*, he realized, *and with that greatsword he has weight and reach on me.* It would have been a different fight if Jon had been armed with Longclaw, but ...

His chance came on Rattleshirt's next backswing. Jon threw himself forward, bulling into the other man, and they went down together, legs entangled. Steel slammed on steel. Both men lost their swords as they rolled on the hard ground. The wildling drove a knee between Jon's legs. Jon lashed out with a mailed fist. Somehow Rattleshirt ended up on top, with Jon's head in his hands. He smashed it against the ground, then wrenched his visor open. "If I had me a dagger, you'd be less an eye by now," he snarled, before Horse and Iron Emmett dragged him off the lord commander's chest. "Let go o' me, you bloody crows," he roared.

Jon struggled to one knee. His head was ringing, and his mouth was full of blood. He spat it out and said, "Well fought."

"You flatter yourself, crow. I never broke a sweat."

"Next time you will," said Jon. Dolorous Edd helped him to his feet and unbuckled his helm. It had acquired several deep dents that had not been there when he'd donned it. "Release him." Jon tossed the helm to Hop-Robin, who dropped it.

“My lord,” said Iron Emmett, “he threatened your life, we all heard. He said that if he had a dagger—”

“He does have a dagger. Right there on his belt.” *There is always someone quicker and stronger*, Ser Rodrik had once told Jon and Robb. *He’s the man you want to face in the yard before you need to face his like upon a battlefield.*

“Lord Snow?” a soft voice said.

He turned to find Clydas standing beneath the broken archway, a parchment in his hand. “From Stannis?” Jon had been hoping for some word from the king. The Night’s Watch took no part, he knew, and it should not matter to him which king emerged triumphant. Somehow it did. “Is it Deepwood?”

“No, my lord.” Clydas thrust the parchment forward. It was tightly rolled and sealed, with a button of hard pink wax. *Only the Dreadfort uses pink sealing wax.* Jon ripped off his gauntlet, took the letter, cracked the seal. When he saw the signature, he forgot the battering Rattleshirt had given him.

Ramsay Bolton, Lord of the Hornwood, it read, in a huge, spiky hand. The brown ink came away in flakes when Jon brushed it with his thumb. Beneath Bolton’s signature, Lord Dustin, Lady Cerwyn, and four Ryswells had appended their own marks and seals. A cruder hand had drawn the giant of House Umber. “Might we know what it says, my lord?” asked Iron Emmett.

Jon saw no reason not to tell him. “Moat Cailin is taken. The flayed corpses of the ironmen have been nailed to posts along the kingsroad. Roose Bolton summons all leal lords to Barrowton, to affirm their loyalty to the Iron Throne and celebrate his son’s wedding to ...” His heart seemed to stop for a moment. *No, that is not possible. She died in King’s Landing, with Father.*

“Lord Snow?” Clydas peered at him closely with his dim pink eyes. “Are you ... unwell? You seem ...”

“He’s to marry Arya Stark. My little sister.” Jon could almost see her in that moment, long-faced and gawky, all knobby knees and sharp elbows, with her dirty face and tangled hair. They would wash the one and comb the other, he did not doubt, but he could not imagine Arya in a wedding gown, nor Ramsay Bolton’s bed. *No matter how afraid she is, she will not show it. If he tries to lay a hand on her, she’ll fight him.*

“Your sister,” Iron Emmett said, “how old is ...”

By now she’d be eleven, Jon thought. Still a child. “I have no sister. Only brothers. Only you.” Lady Catelyn would have rejoiced to hear those words, he knew. That did not make them easier to say. His fingers closed around the parchment. *Would that they could crush Ramsay Bolton’s throat as easily.*

Clydas cleared his throat. “Will there be an answer?”

Jon shook his head and walked away.

By nightfall the bruises that Rattleshirt had given him had turned purple. “They’ll go yellow before they fade away,” he told Mormont’s raven. “I’ll look as sallow as the Lord of Bones.”

“*Bones,*” the bird agreed. “*Bones, bones.*”

He could hear the faint murmur of voices coming from outside, although the sound was too weak to make out words. *They sound a thousand leagues away.* It was Lady Melisandre and her followers at their nightfire. Every night at dusk the red woman led her followers in their twilight prayer, asking her red god to see them through the dark. *For the night is dark and full of terrors.* With Stannis and most of the queen’s men gone, her flock was much diminished; half a hundred of the free folk up from Mole’s Town, the handful of guards the king had left her, perhaps a dozen black brothers who had taken her red god for their own.

Jon felt as stiff as a man of sixty years. *Dark dreams, he thought, and guilt.* His thoughts kept returning to Arya. *There is no way I can help her. I put all kin aside when I said my words. If one of my men told me his sister was in*

peril, I would tell him that was no concern of his. Once a man had said the words his blood was black. *Black as a bastard's heart.* He'd had Mikken make a sword for Arya once, a bravo's blade, made small to fit her hand. *Needle.* He wondered if she still had it. *Stick them with the pointy end,* he'd told her, but if she tried to stick the Bastard, it could mean her life.

"*Snow,*" muttered Lord Mormont's raven. "*Snow, snow.*"

Suddenly he could not suffer it a moment longer.

He found Ghost outside his door, gnawing on the bone of an ox to get at the marrow. "When did you get back?" The direwolf got to his feet, abandoning the bone to come padding after Jon.

Mully and Kegs stood inside the doors, leaning on their spears. "A cruel cold out there, m'lord," warned Mully through his tangled orange beard. "Will you be out long?"

"No. I just need a breath of air." Jon stepped out into the night. The sky was full of stars, and the wind was gusting along the Wall. Even the moon looked cold; there were goosebumps all across its face. Then the first gust caught him, slicing through his layers of wool and leather to set his teeth to chattering. He stalked across the yard, into the teeth of that wind. His cloak flapped loudly from his shoulders. Ghost came after. *Where am I going? What am I doing?* Castle Black was still and silent, its halls and towers dark. *My seat,* Jon Snow reflected. *My hall, my home, my command. A ruin.*

In the shadow of the Wall, the direwolf brushed up against his fingers. For half a heartbeat the night came alive with a thousand smells, and Jon Snow heard the crackle of the crust breaking on a patch of old snow. Someone was behind him, he realized suddenly. Someone who smelled warm as a summer day.

When he turned he saw Ygritte.

She stood beneath the scorched stones of the Lord Commander's Tower, cloaked in darkness and in memory. The light of the moon was in her hair,

her red hair kissed by fire. When he saw that, Jon's heart leapt into his mouth. "Ygritte," he said.

"Lord Snow." The voice was Melisandre's.

Surprise made him recoil from her. "Lady Melisandre." He took a step backwards. "I mistook you for someone else." *At night all robes are grey.* Yet suddenly hers were red. He did not understand how he could have taken her for Ygritte. She was taller, thinner, older, though the moonlight washed years from her face. Mist rose from her nostrils, and from pale hands naked to the night. "You will freeze your fingers off," Jon warned.

"If that is the will of R'hllor. Night's powers cannot touch one whose heart is bathed in god's holy fire."

"Your heart does not concern me. Just your hands."

"The heart is all that matters. Do not despair, Lord Snow. Despair is a weapon of the enemy, whose name may not be spoken. Your sister is not lost to you."

"I have no sister." The words were knives. *What do you know of my heart, priestess? What do you know of my sister?*

Melisandre seemed amused. "What is her name, this little sister that you do not have?"

"Arya." His voice was hoarse. "My half-sister, truly ..."

"... for you are bastard born. I had not forgotten. I have seen your sister in my fires, fleeing from this marriage they have made for her. Coming here, to you. A girl in grey on a dying horse, I have seen it plain as day. It has not happened yet, but it will." She gazed at Ghost. "May I touch your ... wolf?"

The thought made Jon uneasy. "Best not."

"He will not harm me. You call him Ghost, yes?"

"Yes, but ..."

“*Ghost*.” Melisandre made the word a song.

The direwolf padded toward her. Wary, he stalked about her in a circle, sniffing. When she held out her hand he smelled that too, then shoved his nose against her fingers.

Jon let out a white breath. “He is not always so ...”

“... warm? Warmth calls to warmth, Jon Snow.” Her eyes were two red stars, shining in the dark. At her throat, her ruby gleamed, a third eye glowing brighter than the others. Jon had seen Ghost’s eyes blazing red the same way, when they caught the light just right. “*Ghost*,” he called. “To me.”

The direwolf looked at him as if he were a stranger.

Jon frowned in disbelief. “That’s ... queer.”

“You think so?” She knelt and scratched Ghost behind his ear. “Your Wall is a queer place, but there is power here, if you will use it. Power in you, and in this beast. You resist it, and that is your mistake. Embrace it. Use it.”

I am not a wolf, he thought. “And how would I do that?”

“I can show you.” Melisandre draped one slender arm over Ghost, and the direwolf licked her face. “The Lord of Light in his wisdom made us male and female, two parts of a greater whole. In our joining there is power. Power to make life. Power to make light. Power to cast shadows.”

“Shadows.” The world seemed darker when he said it. “Every man who walks the earth casts a shadow on the world. Some are thin and weak, others long and dark. You should look behind you, Lord Snow. The moon has kissed you and etched your shadow upon the ice twenty feet tall.”

Jon glanced over his shoulder. The shadow was there, just as she had said, etched in moonlight against the Wall. *A girl in grey on a dying horse*, he thought. *Coming here, to you. Arya*. He turned back to the red priest-ess. Jon could feel her warmth. *She has power*. The thought came unbidden,

seizing him with iron teeth, but this was not a woman he cared to be indebted to, not even for his little sister. “Dalla told me something once. Val’s sister, Mance Rayder’s wife. She said that sorcery was a sword without a hilt. There is no safe way to grasp it.”

“A wise woman.” Melisandre rose, her red robes stirring in the wind. “A sword without a hilt is still a sword, though, and a sword is a fine thing to have when foes are all about. Hear me now, Jon Snow. Nine crows flew into the white wood to find your foes for you. Three of them are dead. They have not died yet, but their death is out there waiting for them, and they ride to meet it. You sent them forth to be your eyes in the darkness, but they will be eyeless when they return to you. I have seen their pale dead faces in my flames. Empty sockets, weeping blood.” She pushed her red hair back, and her red eyes shone. “You do not believe me. You will. The cost of that belief will be three lives. A small price to pay for wisdom, some might say ... but not one you had to pay. Remember that when you behold the blind and ravaged faces of your dead. And come that day, take my hand.” The mist rose from her pale flesh, and for a moment it seemed as if pale, sorcerous flames were playing about her fingers. “Take my hand,” she said again, “and let me save your sister.”