



JON

Iron Emmett was a long, lanky young ranger whose endurance, strength, and swordsmanship were the pride of Eastwatch. Jon always came away from their sessions stiff and sore, and woke the next day covered with bruises, which was just the way he wanted it. He would never get any better going up against the likes of Satin and Horse, or even Grenn.

Most days he gave as good as he got, Jon liked to think, but not today. He had hardly slept last night, and after an hour of restless tossing he had given up even the attempt, dressed, and walked the top of the Wall till the sun came up, wrestling with Stannis Baratheon's offer. The lack of sleep was catching up with him now, and Emmett was hammering him mercilessly across the yard, driving him back on his heels with one long looping cut after another, and slamming him with his shield from time to time for good measure. Jon's arm had gone numb from the shock of impact, and the edgeless practice sword seemed to be growing heavier with every passing moment.

He was almost ready to lower his blade and call a halt when Emmett feinted low and came in over his shield with a savage forehand slash that caught Jon on the temple. He staggered, his helm and head both ringing from the force of the blow. For half a heartbeat the world beyond his eyeslit was a blur.

And then the years were gone, and he was back at Winterfell once more, wearing a quilted leather coat in place of mail and plate. His sword was made of wood, and it was Robb who stood facing him, not Iron Emmett.

Every morning they had trained together, since they were big enough to walk; Snow and Stark, spinning and slashing about the wards of Winterfell, shouting and laughing, sometimes crying when there was no one else to see. They were not little boys when they fought, but knights and mighty heroes. “I’m Prince Aemon the Dragonknight,” Jon would call out, and Robb would shout back, “Well, I’m Florian the Fool.” Or Robb would say, “I’m the Young Dragon,” and Jon would reply, “I’m Ser Ryam Redwyne.”

That morning he called it first. “I’m Lord of Winterfell!” he cried, as he had a hundred times before. Only this time, *this* time, Robb had answered, “You can’t be Lord of Winterfell, you’re bastard-born. My lady mother says you can’t ever be the Lord of Winterfell.”

I thought I had forgotten that. Jon could taste blood in his mouth, from the blow he’d taken.

In the end Halder and Horse had to pull him away from Iron Emmett, one man on either arm. The ranger sat on the ground dazed, his shield half in splinters, the visor of his helm knocked askew, and his sword six yards away. “Jon, enough,” Halder was shouting, “he’s down, you disarmed him. *Enough!*”

No. Not enough. Never enough. Jon let his sword drop. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “Emmett, are you hurt?”

Iron Emmett pulled his battered helm off. “Was there some part of *yield* you could not comprehend, Lord Snow?” It was said amiably, though. Emmett was an amiable man, and he loved the song of swords. “Warrior defend me,” he groaned, “now I know how Qhorin Halfhand must have felt.”

That was too much. Jon wrenched free of his friends and retreated to the armory, alone. His ears were still ringing from the blow Emmett had dealt him. He sat on the bench and buried his head in his hands. *Why am I so angry?* he asked himself, but it was a stupid question. *Lord of Winterfell. I could be the Lord of Winterfell. My father’s heir.*

It was not Lord Eddard's face he saw floating before him, though; it was Lady Catelyn's. With her deep blue eyes and hard cold mouth, she looked a bit like Stannis. *Iron*, he thought, *but brittle*. She was looking at him the way she used to look at him at Winterfell, whenever he had bested Robb at swords or sums or most anything. *Who are you?* that look had always seemed to say. *This is not your place. Why are you here?*

His friends were still out in the practice yard, but Jon was in no fit state to face them. He left the armory by the back, descending a steep flight of stone steps to the wormways, the tunnels that linked the castle's keeps and towers below the earth. It was short walk to the bathhouse, where he took a cold plunge to wash the sweat off and soaked in a hot stone tub. The warmth took some of the ache from his muscles and made him think of Winterfell's muddy pools, steaming and bubbling in the godswood. *Winterfell*, he thought. *Theon left it burned and broken, but I could restore it.* Surely his father would have wanted that, and Robb as well. They would never have wanted the castle left in ruins.

You can't be the Lord of Winterfell, you're bastard-born, he heard Robb say again. And the stone kings were growling at him with granite tongues. *You do not belong here. This is not your place.* When Jon closed his eyes he saw the heart tree, with its pale limbs, red leaves, and solemn face. The weirwood was the heart of Winterfell, Lord Eddard always said . . . but to save the castle Jon would have to tear that heart up by its ancient roots, and feed it to the red woman's hungry fire god. *I have no right*, he thought. *Winterfell belongs to the old gods.*

The sound of voices echoing off the vaulted ceiling brought him back to Castle Black. "I don't know," a man was saying, in a voice thick with doubts. "Maybe if I knew the man better . . . Lord Stannis didn't have much good to say of him, I'll tell you that."

"When has Stannis Baratheon ever had much good to say of anyone?" Ser Alliser's flinty voice was unmistakable. "If we let Stannis choose our Lord Commander, we become his bannermen in all but name. Tywin Lannister is not like to forget that, and you know it will be Lord Tywin who wins in the end. He's already beaten Stannis once, on the Blackwater."

“Lord Tywin favors Slynt,” said Bowen Marsh, in a fretful, anxious voice. “I can show you his letter, Othell. ‘Our faithful friend and servant,’ he called him.”

Jon Snow sat up suddenly, and the three men froze at the sound of the slosh. “My lords,” he said with cold courtesy.

“What are you doing here, bastard?” Thorne asked.

“Bathing. But don’t let me spoil your plotting.” Jon climbed from the water, dried, dressed, and left them to conspire.

Outside, he found he had no idea where he was going. He walked past the shell of the Lord Commander’s Tower, where once he’d saved the Old Bear from a dead man; past the spot where Ygritte had died with that sad smile on her face; past the King’s Tower where he and Satin and Deaf Dick Follard had waited for the Magnar and his Thenns; past the heaped and charred remains of the great wooden stair. The inner gate was open, so Jon went down the tunnel, through the Wall. He could feel the cold around him, the weight of all the ice above his head. He walked past the place where Donal Noye and Mag the Mighty had fought and died together, through the new outer gate, and back into the pale cold sunlight.

Only then did he permit himself to stop, to take a breath, to think. Othell Yarwyck was not a man of strong convictions, except when it came to wood and stone and mortar. The Old Bear had known that. *Thorne and Marsh will sway him, Yarwyck will support Lord Janos, and Lord Janos will be chosen Lord Commander. And what does that leave me, if not Winterfell?*

A wind swirled against the Wall, tugging at his cloak. He could feel the cold coming off the ice the way heat comes off a fire. Jon pulled up his hood and began to walk again. The afternoon was growing old, and the sun was low in the west. A hundred yards away was the camp where King Stannis had confined his wildling captives within a ring of ditches, sharpened stakes, and high wooden fences. To his left were three great firepits, where the victors had burned the bodies of all the free folk to die beneath the Wall, huge pelted giants and little Hornfoot men alike. The killing ground was still a desolation of scorched weeds and hardened pitch, but Mance’s people had left traces of themselves everywhere; a torn hide that might have been part of a tent, a giant’s maul, the wheel of a chariot, a

broken spear, a pile of mammoth dung. On the edge of the haunted forest, where the tents had been, Jon found an oakwood stump and sat.

Ygritte wanted me to be a wildling. Stannis wants me to be the Lord of Winterfell. But what do I want? The sun crept down the sky to dip behind the Wall where it curved through the western hills. Jon watched as that towering expanse of ice took on the reds and pinks of sunset. *Would I sooner be hanged for a turncloak by Lord Janos, or forswear my vows, marry Val, and become the Lord of Winterfell?* It seemed an easy choice when he thought of it in those terms . . . though if Ygritte had still been alive, it might have been even easier. Val was a stranger to him. She was not hard on the eyes, certainly, and she had been sister to Mance Rayder's queen, but still . . .

I would need to steal her if I wanted her love, but she might give me children. I might someday hold a son of my own blood in my arms. A son was something Jon Snow had never dared dream of, since he decided to live his life on the Wall. *I could name him Robb. Val would want to keep her sister's son, but we could foster him at Winterfell, and Gilly's boy as well. Sam would never need to tell his lie. We'd find a place for Gilly too, and Sam could come visit her once a year or so. Mance's son and Craster's would grow up brothers, as I once did with Robb.*

He wanted it, Jon knew then. He wanted it as much as he had ever wanted anything. *I have always wanted it*, he thought, guiltily. *May the gods forgive me.* It was a hunger inside him, sharp as a dragonglass blade. A hunger . . . he could feel it. It was food he needed, prey, a red deer that stank of fear or a great elk proud and defiant. He needed to kill and fill his belly with fresh meat and hot dark blood. His mouth began to water with the thought.

It was a long moment before he understood what was happening. When he did, he bolted to his feet. "*Ghost?*" He turned toward the wood, and there he came, padding silently out of the green dusk, the breath coming warm and white from his open jaws. "*Ghost!*" he shouted, and the direwolf broke into a run. He was leaner than he had been, but bigger as well, and the only sound he made was the soft crunch of dead leaves beneath his paws. When he reached Jon he leapt, and they wrestled amidst brown grass and long shadows as the stars came out above them. "Gods, wolf, where have you

been?" Jon said when Ghost stopped worrying at his forearm. "I thought you'd died on me, like Robb and Ygritte and all the rest. I've had no sense of you, not since I climbed the Wall, not even in dreams." The direwolf had no answer, but he licked Jon's face with a tongue like a wet rasp, and his eyes caught the last light and shone like two great red suns.

Red eyes, Jon realized, but not like Melisandre's. He had a weirwood's eyes. Red eyes, red mouth, white fur. Blood and bone, like a heart tree. He belongs to the old gods, this one. And he alone of all the direwolves was white. Six pups they'd found in the late summer snows, him and Robb; five that were grey and black and brown, for the five Starks, and one white, as white as Snow.

He had his answer then.

Beneath the Wall, the queen's men were kindling their nightfire. He saw Melisandre emerge from the tunnel with the king beside her, to lead the prayers she believed would keep the dark away. "Come, Ghost," Jon told the wolf. "With me. You're hungry, I know. I could feel it." They ran together for the gate, circling wide around the nightfire, where reaching flames clawed at the black belly of the night.

The king's men were much in evidence in the yards of Castle Black. They stopped as Jon went by, and gaped at him. None of them had ever seen a direwolf before, he realized, and Ghost was twice as large as the common wolves that prowled their southron greenwoods. As he walked toward the armory, Jon chanced to look up and saw Val standing in her tower window. *I'm sorry, he thought. I'm not the man to steal you out of there.*

In the practice yard he came upon a dozen king's men with torches and long spears in their hands. Their sergeant looked at Ghost and scowled, and a couple of his men lowered their spears until the knight who led them said, "Move aside and let them pass." To Jon he said, "You're late for your supper."

"Then get out of my way, ser," Jon replied, and he did.

He could hear the noise even before he reached the bottom of the steps; raised voices, curses, someone pounding on a table. Jon stepped into the vault all but unnoticed. His brothers crowded the benches and the tables,

but more were standing and shouting than were sitting, and no one was eating. There was no food. *What's happening here?* Lord Janos Slynt was bellowing about turncloaks and treason, Iron Emmett stood on a table with a naked sword in his fist, Three-Finger Hobb was cursing a ranger from the Shadow Tower . . . some Eastwatch man slammed his fist onto the table again and again, demanding quiet, but all that did was add to the din echoing off the vaulted ceiling.

Pyp was the first to see Jon. He grinned at the sight of Ghost, put two fingers in his mouth, and whistled as only a mummer's boy could whistle. The shrill sound cut through the clamor like a sword. As Jon walked toward the tables, more of the brothers took note, and fell quiet. A hush spread across the cellar, until the only sounds were Jon's heels clicking on the stone floor, and the soft crackle of the logs in the hearth.

Ser Alliser Thorne shattered the silence. "The turncloak graces us with his presence at last."

Lord Janos was red-faced and quivering. "The *beast*," he gasped. "Look! The beast that tore the life from Halfhand. A warg walks among us, brothers. A *WARG!* This . . . this *creature* is not fit to lead us! This *beastling* is not fit to live!"

Ghost bared his teeth, but Jon put a hand on his head. "My lord," he said, "will you tell me what's happened here?"

Maester Aemon answered, from the far end of the hall. "Your name has been put forth as Lord Commander, Jon."

That was so absurd Jon had to smile. "By who?" he said, looking for his friends. This had to be one of Pyp's japes, surely. But Pyp shrugged at him, and Grenn shook his head. It was Dolorous Edd Tollett who stood. "By me. Aye, it's a terrible cruel thing to do to a friend, but better you than me."

Lord Janos started sputtering again. "This, this is an outrage. We ought to hang this *boy*. Yes! Hang him, I say, hang him for a turncloak and a warg, along with his friend Mance Rayder. Lord *Commander*? I will not have it, I will not suffer it!"

Cotter Pyke stood up. "*You* won't suffer it? Might be you had those gold cloaks trained to lick your bloody arse, but you're wearing a black cloak now."

“Any brother may offer any name for our consideration, so long as the man has said his vows,” Ser Denys Mallister said. “Tollett is well within his rights, my lord.”

A dozen men started to talk at once, each trying to drown out the others, and before long half the hall was shouting once more. This time it was Ser Alliser Thorne who leapt up on the table, and raised his hands for quiet. “*Brothers!*” he cried, “this gains us naught. I say we vote. This *king* who has taken the King’s Tower has posted men at all the doors to see that we do not eat nor leave till we have made a choice. So be it! We will choose, and choose again, all night if need be, until we have our lord . . . but before we cast our tokens, I believe our First Builder has something to say to us.”

Othell Yarwyck stood up slowly, frowning. The big builder rubbed his long lantern jaw and said, “Well, I’m pulling my name out. If you wanted me, you had ten chances to choose me, and you didn’t. Not enough of you, anyway. I was going to say that those who were casting a token for me ought to choose Lord Janos . . .”

Ser Alliser nodded. “Lord Slynt is the best possible—”

“I wasn’t *done*, Alliser,” Yarwyck complained. “Lord Slynt commanded the City Watch in King’s Landing, we all know, and he was Lord of Harrenhal . . .”

“He’s never *seen* Harrenhal,” Cotter Pyke shouted out.

“Well, that’s so,” said Yarwyck. “Anyway, now that I’m standing here, I don’t recall why I thought Slynt would be such a good choice. That would be sort of kicking King Stannis in the mouth, and I don’t see how that serves us. Might be Snow would be better. He’s been longer on the Wall, he’s Ben Stark’s nephew, and he served the Old Bear as squire.” Yarwyck shrugged. “Pick who you want, just so it’s not me.” He sat down.

Janos Slynt had turned from red to purple, Jon saw, but Ser Alliser Thorne had gone pale. The Eastwatch man was pounding his fist on the table again, but now he was shouting for the kettle. Some of his friends took up the cry. “*Kettle!*” they roared, as one. “*Kettle, kettle, KETTLE!*”

The kettle was in the corner by the hearth, a big black potbellied thing with two huge handles and a heavy lid. Maester Aemon said a word to Sam and Clydas and they went and grabbed the handles and dragged the kettle

over to the table. A few of the brothers were already queueing up by the token barrels as Clydas took the lid off and almost dropped it on his foot. With a raucous scream and a clap of wings, a huge raven burst out of the kettle. It flapped upward, seeking the rafters perhaps, or a window to make its escape, but there were no rafters in the vault, nor windows either. The raven was trapped. Cawing loudly, it circled the hall, once, twice, three times. And Jon heard Samwell Tarly shout, "I know that bird! That's Lord Mormont's raven!"

The raven landed on the table nearest Jon. "*Snow*," it cawed. It was an old bird, dirty and bedraggled. "*Snow*," it said again, "*Snow, snow, snow*." It walked to the end of the table, spread its wings again, and flew to Jon's shoulder.

Lord Janos Slynt sat down so heavily he made a *thump*, but Ser Alliser filled the vault with mocking laughter. "Ser Piggy thinks we're all fools, brothers," he said. "He's taught the bird this little trick. They all say *snow*, go up to the rookery and hear for yourselves. Mormont's bird had more words than that."

The raven cocked its head and looked at Jon. "*Corn*?" it said hopefully. When it got neither corn nor answer, it *quorked* and muttered, "*Kettle? Kettle? Kettle?*"

The rest was arrowheads, a torrent of arrowheads, a flood of arrowheads, arrowheads enough to drown the last few stones and shells, and all the copper pennies too.

When the count was done, Jon found himself surrounded. Some clapped him on the back, whilst others bent the knee to him as if he were a lord in truth. Satin, Owen the Oaf, Halder, Toad, Spare Boot, Giant, Mully, Ulmer of the Kingswood, Sweet Donnel Hill, and half a hundred more pressed around him. Dywen clacked his wooden teeth and said, "Gods be good, our Lord Commander's still in swaddling clothes." Iron Emmett said, "I hope this don't mean I can't beat the bloody piss out of you next time we train, my lord." Three-Finger Hobb wanted to know if he'd still be eating with the men, or if he'd want his meals sent up to his solar. Even Bowen Marsh came up to say he would be glad to continue as Lord Steward if that was Lord Snow's wish.

“Lord Snow,” said Cotter Pyke, “if you muck this up, I’m going to rip your liver out and eat it raw with onions.”

Ser Denys Mallister was more courteous. “It was a hard thing young Samwell asked of me,” the old knight confessed. “When Lord Qorgyle was chosen, I told myself, ‘No matter, he has been longer on the Wall than you have, your time will come.’ When it was Lord Mormont, I thought, ‘He is strong and fierce, but he is old, your time may yet come.’ But you are half a boy, Lord Snow, and now I must return to the Shadow Tower knowing that my time will never come.” He smiled a tired smile. “Do not make me die regretful. Your uncle was a great man. Your lord father and his father as well. I shall expect full as much of you.”

“Aye,” said Cotter Pyke. “And you can start by telling those king’s men that it’s done, and we want our bloody supper.”

“*Supper*,” screamed the raven. “*Supper, supper.*”

The king’s men cleared the door when they told them of the choosing, and Three-Finger Hobb and half a dozen helpers went trotting off to the kitchen to fetch the food. Jon did not wait to eat. He walked across the castle, wondering if he were dreaming, with the raven on his shoulder and Ghost at his heels. Pyp, Grenn, and Sam trailed after him, chattering, but he hardly heard a word until Grenn whispered, “*Sam* did it,” and Pyp said, “Sam *did* it!” Pyp had brought a wineskin with him, and he took a long drink and chanted, “Sam, Sam, Sam the wizard, Sam the wonder, Sam Sam the marvel man, he did it. But when did you hide the raven in the kettle, Sam, and how in seven hells could you be certain it would fly to Jon? It would have mucked up everything if the bird had decided to perch on Janos Slynt’s fat head.”

“I had nothing to do with the bird,” Sam insisted. “When it flew out of the kettle I almost wet myself.”

Jon laughed, half amazed that he still remembered how. “You’re all a bunch of mad fools, do you know that?”

“Us?” said Pyp. “You call *us* fools? We’re not the ones who got chosen as the nine-hundredth-and-ninety-eighth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. You best have some wine, Lord Jon. I think you’re going to need a *lot* of wine.”

So Jon Snow took the wineskin from his hand and had a swallow. But only one. The Wall was his, the night was dark, and he had a king to face.