



JON

Big enough for you?” Snowflakes speckled Tormund’s broad face, melting in his hair and beard.

The giants swayed slowly atop the mammoths as they rode past two by two. Jon’s garron shied, frightened by such strangeness, but whether it was the mammoths or their riders that scared him it was hard to say. Even Ghost backed off a step, baring his teeth in a silent snarl. The direwolf was big, but the mammoths were a deal bigger, and there were many and more of them.

Jon took the horse in hand and held him still, so he could count the giants emerging from the blowing snow and pale mists that swirled along the Milkwater. He was well beyond fifty when Tormund said something and he lost the count. *There must be hundreds.* No matter how many went past, they just seemed to keep coming.

In Old Nan’s stories, giants were outsized men who lived in colossal castles, fought with huge swords, and walked about in boots a boy could hide in. These were something else, more bearlike than human, and as wooly as the mammoths they rode. Seated, it was hard to say how big they truly were. *Ten feet tall maybe, or twelve,* Jon thought. *Maybe fourteen, but no taller.* Their sloping chests might have passed for those of men, but their arms hung down too far, and their lower torsos looked half again as wide as their upper. Their legs were shorter than their arms, but very thick, and they

wore no boots at all; their feet were broad splayed things, hard and horny and black. Neckless, their huge heavy heads thrust forward from between their shoulder blades, and their faces were squashed and brutal. Rats' eyes no larger than beads were almost lost within folds of horny flesh, but they snuffled constantly, smelling as much as they saw.

They're not wearing skins, Jon realized. *That's hair*. Shaggy pelts covered their bodies, thick below the waist, sparser above. The stink that came off them was choking, but perhaps that was the mammoths. *And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter, and woke giants from the earth*. He looked for great swords ten feet long, but saw only clubs. Most were just the limbs of dead trees, some still trailing shattered branches. A few had stone balls lashed to the ends to make colossal mauls. *The song never says if the horn can put them back to sleep*.

One of the giants coming up on them looked older than the rest. His pelt was grey and streaked with white, and the mammoth he rode, larger than any of the others, was grey and white as well. Tormund shouted something up to him as he passed, harsh clanging words in a tongue that Jon did not comprehend. The giant's lips split apart to reveal a mouth full of huge square teeth, and he made a sound half belch and half rumble. After a moment Jon realized he was laughing. The mammoth turned its massive head to regard the two of them briefly, one huge tusk passing over the top of Jon's head as the beast lumbered by, leaving huge footprints in the soft mud and fresh snow along the river. The giant shouted down something in the same coarse tongue that Tormund had used.

"Was that their king?" asked Jon.

"Giants have no kings, no more'n mammoths do, nor snow bears, nor the great whales o' the grey sea. That was Mag Mar Tun Doh Weg. Mag the Mighty. You can kneel to him if you like, he won't mind. I know your kneeler's knees must be itching, for want of some king to bend to. Watch out he don't step on you, though. Giants have bad eyes, and might be he wouldn't see some little crow all the way down there by his feet."

"What did you say to him? Was that the Old Tongue?"

"Aye. I asked him if that was his father he was forking, they looked so much alike, except his father had a better smell."

“And what did he say to you?”

Tormund Thunderfist cracked a gap-toothed smile. “He asked me if that was my daughter riding there beside me, with her smooth pink cheeks.” The wildling shook snow from his arm and turned his horse about. “It may be he never saw a man without a beard before. Come, we start back. Mance grows sore wroth when I’m not found in my accustomed place.”

Jon wheeled and followed Tormund back toward the head of the column, his new cloak hanging heavy from his shoulders. It was made of unwashed sheepskins, worn fleece side in, as the wildlings suggested. It kept the snow off well enough, and at night it was good and warm, but he kept his black cloak as well, folded up beneath his saddle. “Is it true you killed a giant once?” he asked Tormund as they rode. Ghost loped silently beside them, leaving paw prints in the new-fallen snow.

“Now why would you doubt a mighty man like me? It was winter and I was half a boy, and stupid the way boys are. I went too far and my horse died and then a storm caught me. A *true* storm, not no little dusting such as this. Har! I knew I’d freeze to death before it broke. So I found me a sleeping giant, cut open her belly, and crawled up right inside her. Kept me warm enough, she did, but the stink near did for me. The worst thing was, she woke up when the spring come and took me for her babe. Suckled me for three whole moons before I could get away. Har! There’s times I miss the taste o’ giant’s milk, though.”

“If she nursed you, you couldn’t have killed her.”

“I never did, but see you don’t go spreading that about. Tormund Giantsbane has a better ring to it than Tormund Giantsbabe, and that’s the honest truth o’ it.”

“So how did you come by your other names?” Jon asked. “Mance called you the Horn-Blower, didn’t he? Mead-king of Ruddy Hall, Husband to Bears, Father to Hosts?” It was the horn blowing he particularly wanted to hear about, but he dared not ask too plainly. *And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter, and woke giants from the earth.* Is that where they had come from, them and their mammoths? Had Mance Rayder found the Horn of Joramun, and given it to Tormund Thunderfist to blow?

“Are all crows so curious?” asked Tormund. “Well, here’s a tale for you. It were another winter, colder even than the one I spent inside that giant, and snowing day and night, snowflakes as big as your head, not these little things. It snowed so hard the whole village was half buried. I was in me Ruddy Hall, with only a cask o’ mead to keep me company and nothing to do but drink it. The more I drank the more I got to thinking about this woman lived close by, a fine strong woman with the biggest pair of teats you ever saw. She had a temper on her, that one, but oh, she could be warm too, and in the deep of winter a man needs his warmth.

“The more I drank the more I thought about her, and the more I thought the harder me member got, till I couldn’t suffer it no more. Fool that I was, I bundled meself up in furs from head to heels, wrapped a winding wool around me face, and set off to find her. The snow was coming down so hard I got turned around once or twice, and the wind blew right through me and froze me bones, but finally I come on her, all bundled up like I was.

“The woman had a terrible temper, and she put up quite the fight when I laid hands on her. It was all I could do to carry her home and get her out o’ them furs, but when I did, oh, she was hotter even than I remembered, and we had a fine old time, and then I went to sleep. Next morning when I woke the snow had stopped and the sun was shining, but I was in no fit state to enjoy it. All ripped and torn I was, and half me member bit right off, and there on me floor was a she-bear’s pelt. And soon enough the free folk were telling tales o’ this bald bear seen in the woods, with the queerest pair o’ cubs behind her. Har!” He slapped a meaty thigh. “Would that I could find her again. She was fine to lay with, that bear. Never was a woman gave me such a fight, nor such strong sons neither.”

“What could you do if you *did* find her?” Jon asked, smiling. “You said she bit your member off.”

“Only half. And half me member is twice as long as any other man’s.” Tormund snorted. “Now as to you . . . is it true they cut your members off when they take you for the Wall?”

“No,” Jon said, affronted.

“I think it must be true. Else why refuse Ygritte? She’d hardly give you any fight at all, seems to me. The girl wants you in her, that’s plain enough

to see.”

Too bloody plain, thought Jon, *and it seems that half the column has seen it*. He studied the falling snow so Tormund might not see him redden. *I am a man of the Night's Watch*, he reminded himself. So why did he feel like some blushing maid?

He spent most of his days in Ygritte's company, and most nights as well. Mance Rayder had not been blind to Rattleshirt's mistrust of the “crow-come-over,” so after he had given Jon his new sheepskin cloak he had suggested that he might want to ride with Tormund Giantsbane instead. Jon had happily agreed, and the very next day Ygritte and Longspear Ryk left Rattleshirt's band for Tormund's as well. “Free folk ride with who they want,” the girl told him, “and we had a bellyful of Bag o' Bones.”

Every night when they made camp, Ygritte threw her sleeping skins down beside his own, no matter if he was near the fire or well away from it. Once he woke to find her nestled against him, her arm across his chest. He lay listening to her breathe for a long time, trying to ignore the tension in his groin. Rangers often shared skins for warmth, but warmth was not all Ygritte wanted, he suspected. After that he had taken to using Ghost to keep her away. Old Nan used to tell stories about knights and their ladies who would sleep in a single bed with a blade between them for honor's sake, but he thought this must be the first time where a direwolf took the place of the sword.

Even then, Ygritte persisted. The day before last, Jon had made the mistake of wishing he had hot water for a bath. “Cold is better,” she had said at once, “if you've got someone to warm you up after. The river's only part ice yet, go on.”

Jon laughed. “You'd freeze me to death.”

“Are all crows afraid of gooseprickles? A little ice won't kill you. I'll jump in with you t'prove it so.”

“And ride the rest of the day with wet clothes frozen to our skins?” he objected.

“Jon Snow, you know nothing. You don't go in with clothes.”

“I don’t go in at all,” he said firmly, just before he heard Tormund Thunderfist bellowing for him (he hadn’t, but never mind).

The wildlings seemed to think Ygritte a great beauty because of her hair; red hair was rare among the free folk, and those who had it were said to be kissed by fire, which was supposed to be lucky. Lucky it might be, and red it certainly was, but Ygritte’s hair was such a tangle that Jon was tempted to ask her if she only brushed it at the changing of the seasons.

At a lord’s court the girl would never have been considered anything but common, he knew. She had a round peasant face, a pug nose, and slightly crooked teeth, and her eyes were too far apart. Jon had noticed all that the first time he’d seen her, when his dirk had been at her throat. Lately, though, he was noticing some other things. When she grinned, the crooked teeth didn’t seem to matter. And maybe her eyes were too far apart, but they were a pretty blue-grey color, and lively as any eyes he knew. Sometimes she sang in a low husky voice that stirred him. And sometimes by the cookfire when she sat hugging her knees with the flames waking echoes in her red hair, and looked at him, just smiling . . . well, *that* stirred some things as well.

But he was a man of the Night’s Watch, he had taken a vow. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. He had said the words before the weirwood, before his father’s gods. He could not unsay them . . . no more than he could admit the reason for his reluctance to Tormund Thunderfist, Father to Bears.

“Do you mislike the girl?” Tormund asked him as they passed another twenty mammoths, these bearing wildlings in tall wooden towers instead of giants.

“No, but I . . .” *What can I say that he will believe?* “I am still too young to wed.”

“Wed?” Tormund laughed. “Who spoke of wedding? In the south, must a man wed every girl he beds?”

Jon could feel himself turning red again. “She spoke for me when Rattleshirt would have killed me. I would not dishonor her.”

“You are a free man now, and Ygritte is a free woman. What dishonor if you lay together?”

“I might get her with child.”

“Aye, I’d hope so. A strong son or a lively laughing girl kissed by fire, and where’s the harm in that?”

Words failed him for a moment. “The boy . . . the child would be a bastard.”

“Are bastards weaker than other children? More sickly, more like to fail?”

“No, but—”

“You’re bastard-born yourself. And if Ygritte does not want a child, she will go to some woods witch and drink a cup o’ moon tea. You do not come into it, once the seed is planted.”

“I will *not* father a bastard.”

Tormund shook his shaggy head. “What fools you kneelers be. Why did you steal the girl if you don’t want her?”

“*Steal?* I never . . .”

“You did,” said Tormund. “You slew the two she was with and carried her off, what do you call it?”

“I took her prisoner.”

“You made her yield to you.”

“Yes, but . . . Tormund, I swear, I’ve never touched her.”

“Are you *certain* they never cut your member off?” Tormund gave a shrug, as if to say he would never understand such madness. “Well, you are a free man now, but if you will not have the girl, best find yourself a she-bear. If a man does not use his member it grows smaller and smaller, until one day he wants to piss and cannot find it.”

Jon had no answer for that. Small wonder that the Seven Kingdoms thought the free folk scarcely human. *They have no laws, no honor, not even simple decency. They steal endlessly from each other, breed like beasts, prefer rape to marriage, and fill the world with baseborn children.* Yet he was growing fond of Tormund Giantsbane, great bag of wind and lies though he was. Longspear as well. *And Ygritte . . . no, I will not think about Ygritte.*

Along with the Tormunds and the Longspears rode other sorts of wildlings, though; men like Rattleshirt and the Weeper who would as soon slit you as spit on you. There was Harma Dogshead, a squat keg of a woman with cheeks like slabs of white meat, who hated dogs and killed one every fortnight to make a fresh head for her banner; earless Styr, Magnar of Thenn, whose own people thought him more god than lord; Varamyr Sixskins, a small mouse of a man whose steed was a savage white snow bear that stood thirteen feet tall on its hind legs. And wherever the bear and Varamyr went, three wolves and a shadowcat came following. Jon had been in his presence only once, and once had been enough; the mere sight of the man had made him bristle, even as the fur on the back of Ghost's neck had bristled at the sight of the bear and that long black-and-white 'cat.

And there were folks fiercer even than Varamyr, from the northernmost reaches of the haunted forest, the hidden valleys of the Frostfangs, and even queerer places: the men of the Frozen Shore who rode in chariots made of walrus bones pulled along by packs of savage dogs, the terrible ice-river clans who were said to feast on human flesh, the cave dwellers with their faces dyed blue and purple and green. With his own eyes Jon had beheld the Hornfoot men trotting along in column on bare soles as hard as boiled leather. He had not seen any snarks or grumpkins, but for all he knew Tormund would be having some to supper.

Half the wildling host had lived all their lives without so much as a glimpse of the Wall, Jon judged, and most of those spoke no word of the Common Tongue. It did not matter. Mance Rayder spoke the Old Tongue, even sang in it, fingering his lute and filling the night with strange wild music.

Mance had spent years assembling this vast plodding host, talking to this clan mother and that magnar, winning one village with sweet words and another with a song and a third with the edge of his sword, making peace between Harma Dogshead and the Lord o' Bones, between the Hornfoots and the Nightrunners, between the walrus men of the Frozen Shore and the cannibal clans of the great ice rivers, hammering a hundred different daggers into one great spear, aimed at the heart of the Seven Kingdoms. He had no crown nor scepter, no robes of silk and velvet, but it was plain to Jon that Mance Rayder *was* a king in more than name.

Jon had joined the wildlings at Qhorin Halfhand's command. "Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them," the ranger had told him, the night before he died. "And *watch*." But all his watching had learned him little. The Halfhand had suspected that the wildlings had gone up into the bleak and barren Frostfangs in search of some weapon, some power, some fell sorcery with which to break the Wall . . . but if they had found any such, no one was boasting of it openly, or showing it to Jon. Nor had Mance Rayder confided any of his plans or strategies. Since that first night, he had hardly seen the man save at a distance.

I will kill him if I must. The prospect gave Jon no joy; there would be no honor in such a killing, and it would mean his own death as well. Yet he could not let the wildlings breach the Wall, to threaten Winterfell and the north, the barrowlands and the Rills, White Harbor and the Stony Shore, even the Neck. For eight thousand years the men of House Stark had lived and died to protect their people against such ravagers and reavers . . . and bastard-born or no, the same blood ran in his veins. *Bran and Rickon are still at Winterfell besides. Maester Luwin, Ser Rodrik, Old Nan, Farlen the kennelmaster, Mikken at his forge and Gage by his ovens . . . everyone I ever knew, everyone I ever loved.* If Jon must slay a man he half admired and almost liked to save them from the mercies of Rattleshirt and Harma Dogshead and the earless Magnar of Thenn, that was what he meant to do.

Still, he prayed his father's gods might spare him that bleak task. The host moved but slowly, burdened as it was by all the wildlings' herds and children and mean little treasures, and the snows had slowed its progress even more. Most of the column was out of the foothills now, oozing down along the west bank of the Milkwater like honey on a cold winter's morning, following the course of the river into the heart of the haunted forest.

And somewhere close ahead, Jon knew, the Fist of the First Men loomed above the trees, home to three hundred black brothers of the Night's Watch, armed, mounted, and waiting. The Old Bear had sent out other scouts besides the Halfhand, and surely Jarman Buckwell or Thoren Smallwood would have returned by now with word of what was coming down out of the mountains.

Mormont will not run, Jon thought. He is too old and he has come too far. He will strike, and damn the numbers. One day soon he would hear the sound of warhorns, and see a column of riders pounding down on them with black cloaks flapping and cold steel in their hands. Three hundred men could not hope to kill a hundred times their number, of course, but Jon did not think they would need to. *He need not slay a thousand, only one. Mance is all that keeps them together.*

The King-beyond-the-Wall was doing all he could, yet the wildlings remained hopelessly undisciplined, and that made them vulnerable. Here and there within the leagues-long snake that was their line of march were warriors as fierce as any in the Watch, but a good third of them were grouped at either end of the column, in Harma Dogshead's van and the savage rearguard with its giants, aurochs, and fire flingers. Another third rode with Mance himself near the center, guarding the wayns and sledges and dog carts that held the great bulk of the host's provisions and supplies, all that remained of the last summer harvest. The rest, divided into small bands under the likes of Rattleshirt, Jarl, Tormund Giantsbane, and the Weeper, served as outriders, foragers, and whips, galloping up and down the column endlessly to keep it moving in a more or less orderly fashion.

And even more telling, only one in a hundred wildlings was mounted. *The Old Bear will go through them like an axe through porridge.* And when that happened, Mance must give chase with his center, to try and blunt the threat. If he should fall in the fight that must follow, the Wall would be safe for another hundred years, Jon judged. *And if not . . .*

He flexed the burned fingers of his sword hand. Longclaw was slung to his saddle, the carved stone wolf's-head pommel and soft leather grip of the great bastard sword within easy reach.

The snow was falling heavily by the time they caught Tormund's band, several hours later. Ghost departed along the way, melting into the forest at the scent of prey. The direwolf would return when they made camp for the night, by dawn at the latest. However far he prowled, Ghost always came back . . . and so, it seemed, did Ygritte.

"So," the girl called when she saw him, "d'you believe us now, Jon Snow? Did you see the giants on their mammoths?"

“Har!” shouted Tormund, before Jon could reply. “The crow’s in love! He means to marry one!”

“A giantess?” Longspear Ryk laughed.

“No, a *mammoth*!” Tormund bellowed. “Har!”

Ygritte trotted beside Jon as he slowed his garron to a walk. She claimed to be three years older than him, though she stood half a foot shorter; however old she might be, the girl was a tough little thing. Stonesnake had called her a “spearwife” when they’d captured her in the Skirling Pass. She wasn’t wed and her weapon of choice was a short curved bow of horn and weirwood, but “spearwife” fit her all the same. She reminded him a little of his sister Arya, though Arya was younger and probably skinnier. It was hard to tell how plump or thin Ygritte might be, with all the furs and skins she wore.

“Do you know ‘The Last of the Giants’?” Without waiting for an answer Ygritte said, “You need a deeper voice than mine to do it proper.” Then she sang, “*Ooooooh, I am the last of the giants, my people are gone from the earth.*”

Tormund Giantsbane heard the words and grinned. “*The last of the great mountain giants, who ruled all the world at my birth,*” he bellowed back through the snow.

Longspear Ryk joined in, singing, “*Oh, the smallfolk have stolen my forests, they’ve stolen my rivers and hills.*”

“*And they’ve built a great wall through my valleys, and fished all the fish from my rills,*” Ygritte and Tormund sang back at him in turn, in suitably gigantic voices.

Tormund’s sons Toregg and Dormund added their deep voices as well, then his daughter Munda and all the rest. Others began to bang their spears on leathern shields to keep rough time, until the whole war band was singing as they rode.

*In stone halls they burn their great fires,
in stone halls they forge their sharp spears.
Whilst I walk alone in the mountains,
with no true companion but tears.
They hunt me with dogs in the daylight,*

*they hunt me with torches by night.
For these men who are small can never stand tall,
whilst giants still walk in the light.
Ooooooooooh, I am the LAST of the giants,
so learn well the words of my song.
For when I am gone the singing will fade,
and the silence shall last long and long.*

There were tears on Ygritte's cheeks when the song ended.

"Why are you weeping?" Jon asked. "It was only a song. There are hundreds of giants, I've just seen them."

"Oh, hundreds," she said furiously. "You know nothing, Jon Snow. You —JON!"

Jon turned at the sudden sound of wings. Blue-grey feathers filled his eyes, as sharp talons buried themselves in his face. Red pain lanced through him sudden and fierce as pinions beat round his head. He saw the beak, but there was no time to get a hand up or reach for a weapon. Jon reeled backward, his foot lost the stirrup, his garron broke in panic, and then he was falling. And still the eagle clung to his face, its talons tearing at him as it flapped and shrieked and pecked. The world turned upside down in a chaos of feathers and horseflesh and blood, and then the ground came up to smash him.

The next he knew, he was on his face with the taste of mud and blood in his mouth and Ygritte kneeling over him protectively, a bone dagger in her hand. He could still hear wings, though the eagle was not in sight. Half his world was black. "My eye," he said in sudden panic, raising a hand to his face.

"It's only blood, Jon Snow. He missed the eye, just ripped your skin up some."

His face was throbbing. Tormund stood over them bellowing, he saw from his right eye as he rubbed blood from his left. Then there were hoofbeats, shouts, and the clacking of old dry bones.

"Bag o' Bones," roared Tormund, "call off your hellcrow!"

"There's your hellcrow!" Rattleshirt pointed at Jon. "Bleeding in the mud like a faithless dog!" The eagle came flapping down to land atop the broken

giant's skull that served him for his helm. "I'm here for him."

"Come take him then," said Tormund, "but best come with sword in hand, for that's where you'll find mine. Might be I'll boil *your* bones, and use your skull to piss in. Har!"

"Once I prick you and let the air out, you'll shrink down smaller'n that girl. Stand aside, or Mance will hear o' this."

Ygritte stood. "What, is it *Mance* who wants him?"

"I said so, didn't I? Get him up on those black feet."

Tormund frowned down at Jon. "Best go, if it's the Mance who's wanting you."

Ygritte helped pull him up. "He's bleeding like a butchered boar. Look what Orell did t' his sweet face."

Can a bird hate? Jon had slain the wilding Orell, but some part of the man remained within the eagle. The golden eyes looked out on him with cold malevolence. "I'll come," he said. The blood kept running down into his right eye, and his cheek was a blaze of pain. When he touched it his black gloves came away stained with red. "Let me catch my garron." It was not the horse he wanted so much as Ghost, but the direwolf was nowhere to be seen. *He could be leagues away by now, ripping out the throat of some elk.* Perhaps that was just as well.

The garron shied away from him when he approached, no doubt frightened by the blood on his face, but Jon calmed him with a few quiet words and finally got close enough to take the reins. As he swung back into the saddle his head whirled. *I will need to get this tended,* he thought, *but not just now. Let the King-beyond-the-Wall see what his eagle did to me.* His right hand opened and closed, and he reached down for Longclaw and slung the bastard sword over a shoulder before he wheeled to trot back to where the Lord of Bones and his band were waiting.

Ygritte was waiting too, sitting on her horse with a fierce look on her face. "I am coming too."

"Be gone." The bones of Rattleshirt's breastplate clattered together. "I was sent for the crow-come-down, none other."

"A free woman rides where she will," Ygritte said.

The wind was blowing snow into Jon's eyes. He could feel the blood freezing on his face. "Are we talking or riding?"

"Riding," said the Lord of Bones.

It was a grim gallop. They rode two miles down the column through swirling snows, then cut through a tangle of baggage wayns to splash across the Milkwater where it took a great loop toward the east. A crust of thin ice covered the river shallows; with every step their horses' hooves crashed through, until they reached the deeper water ten yards out. The snow seemed be falling even faster on the eastern bank, and the drifts were deeper too. *Even the wind is colder.* And night was falling too.

But even through the blowing snow, the shape of the great white hill that loomed above the trees was unmistakable. *The Fist of the First Men.* Jon heard the scream of the eagle overhead. A raven looked down from a soldier pine and *quorked* as he went past. *Had the Old Bear made his attack?* Instead of the clash of steel and the thrum of arrows taking flight, Jon heard only the soft crunch of frozen crust beneath his garron's hooves.

In silence they circled round to the south slope, where the approach was easiest. It was there at the bottom that Jon saw the dead horse, sprawled at the base of the hill, half buried in the snow. Entrails spilled from the belly of the animal like frozen snakes, and one of its legs was gone. *Wolves,* was Jon's first thought, but that was wrong. Wolves eat their kill.

More garrons were strewn across the slope, legs twisted grotesquely, blind eyes staring in death. The wildlings crawled over them like flies, stripping them of saddles, bridles, packs, and armor, and hacking them apart with stone axes.

"Up," Rattleshirt told Jon. "Mance is up top."

Outside the ringwall they dismounted to squeeze through a crooked gap in the stones. The carcass of a shaggy brown garron was impaled upon the sharpened stakes the Old Bear had placed inside every entrance. *He was trying to get out, not in.* There was no sign of a rider.

Inside was more, and worse. Jon had never seen pink snow before. The wind gusted around him, pulling at his heavy sheepskin cloak. Ravens flapped from one dead horse to the next. *Are those wild ravens, or our own?*

Jon could not tell. He wondered where poor Sam was now. And *what* he was.

A crust of frozen blood crunched beneath the heel of his boot. The wildlings were stripping the dead horses of every scrap of steel and leather, even prying the horseshoes off their hooves. A few were going through packs they'd turned up, looking for weapons and food. Jon passed one of Chett's dogs, or what remained of him, lying in a sludgy pool of half-frozen blood.

A few tents were still standing on the far side of the camp, and it was there they found Mance Rayder. Beneath his slashed cloak of black wool and red silk he wore black ringmail and shaggy fur breeches, and on his head was a great bronze-and-iron helm with raven wings at either temple. Jarl was with him, and Harma the Dogshead; Styr as well, and Varamyr Sixskins with his wolves and his shadowcat.

The look Mance gave Jon was grim and cold. "What happened to your face?"

Ygritte said, "Orell tried to take his eye out."

"It was him I asked. Has he lost his tongue? Perhaps he should, to spare us further lies."

Styr the Magnar drew a long knife. "The boy might see more clear with one eye, instead of two."

"Would you like to keep your eye, Jon?" asked the King-beyond-the-Wall. "If so, tell me how many they were. And try and speak the truth this time, Bastard of Winterfell."

Jon's throat was dry. "My lord . . . what . . ."

"I am not your lord," said Mance. "And the *what* is plain enough. Your brothers died. The question is, how many?"

Jon's face was throbbing, the snow kept coming down, and it was hard to think. *You must not balk, whatever is asked of you*, Qhorin had told him. The words stuck in his throat, but he made himself say, "There were three hundred of us."

"Us?" Mance said sharply.

“Them. Three hundred of them.” *Whatever is asked, the Halfhand said. So why do I feel so craven?* “Two hundred from Castle Black, and one hundred from the Shadow Tower.”

“There’s a truer song than the one you sang in my tent.” Mance looked to Harma Dogshead. “How many horses have we found?”

“More’n a hundred,” that huge woman replied, “less than two. There’s more dead to the east, under the snow, hard t’ know how many.” Behind her stood her banner bearer, holding a pole with a dog’s head on it, fresh enough to still be leaking blood.

“You should never have lied to me, Jon Snow,” said Mance.

“I . . . I know that.” *What could he say?*

The wildling king studied his face. “Who had the command here? And tell me true. Was it Rykker? Smallwood? Not Wythers, he’s too feeble. Whose tent was this?”

I have said too much. “You did not find his body?”

Harma snorted, her disdain frosting from her nostrils. “What fools these black crows be.”

“The next time you answer me with a question, I will give you to my Lord of Bones,” Mance Rayder promised Jon. He stepped closer. “Who led here?”

One more step, thought Jon. Another foot. He moved his hand closer to Longclaw’s hilt. *If I hold my tongue . . .*

“Reach up for that bastard sword and I’ll have your bastard head off before it clears the scabbard,” said Mance. “I am fast losing patience with you, crow.”

“Say it,” Ygritte urged. “He’s dead, whoever he was.”

His frown cracked the blood on his cheek. *This is too hard*, Jon thought in despair. *How do I play the turncloak without becoming one?* Qhorin had not told him that. But the second step is always easier than the first. “The Old Bear.”

“That old man?” Harma’s tone said she did not believe it. “He came himself? Then who commands at Castle Black?”

“Bowen Marsh.” This time Jon answered at once. *You must not balk, whatever is asked of you.*

Mance laughed. “If so, our war is won. Bowen knows a deal more about counting swords than he’s ever known about using them.”

“The Old Bear commanded,” said Jon. “This place was high and strong, and he made it stronger. He dug pits and planted stakes, laid up food and water. He was ready for . . .”

“. . . me?” finished Mance Rayder. “Aye, he was. Had I been fool enough to storm this hill, I might have lost five men for every crow I slew and still counted myself lucky.” His mouth grew hard. “But when the dead walk, walls and stakes and swords mean nothing. You cannot fight the dead, Jon Snow. No man knows that half so well as me.” He gazed up at the darkening sky and said, “The crows may have helped us more than they know. I’d wondered why we’d suffered no attacks. But there’s still a hundred leagues to go, and the cold is rising. Varamyr, send your wolves sniffing after the wights, I won’t have them taking us unawares. My Lord of Bones, double all the patrols, and make certain every man has torch and flint. Styr, Jarl, you ride at first light.”

“Mance,” Rattleshirt said, “I want me some crow bones.”

Ygritte stepped in front of Jon. “You can’t kill a man for lying to protect them as was his brothers.”

“They are still his brothers,” declared Styr.

“They’re *not*,” insisted Ygritte. “He never killed me, like they told him. And he slew the Halfhand, we all saw.”

Jon’s breath misted the air. *If I lie to him, he’ll know.* He looked Mance Rayder in the eyes, opened and closed his burned hand. “I wear the cloak you gave me, Your Grace.”

“A sheepskin cloak!” said Ygritte. “And there’s many a night we dance beneath it, too!”

Jarl laughed, and even Harma Dogshead smirked. “Is that the way of it, Jon Snow?” asked Mance Rayder, mildly. “Her and you?”

It was easy to lose your way beyond the Wall. Jon did not know that he could tell honor from shame anymore, or right from wrong. *Father forgive*

me. “Yes,” he said.

Mance nodded. “Good. You’ll go with Jarl and Styr on the morrow, then. Both of you. Far be it from me to separate two hearts that beat as one.”

“Go where?” said Jon.

“Over the Wall. It’s past time you proved your faith with something more than words, Jon Snow.”

The Magnar was not pleased. “What do I want with a crow?”

“He knows the Watch and he knows the Wall,” said Mance, “and he knows Castle Black better than any raider ever could. You’ll find a use for him, or you’re a fool.”

Styr scowled. “His heart may still be black.”

“Then cut it out.” Mance turned to Rattleshirt. “My Lord of Bones, keep the column moving at all costs. If we reach the Wall before Mormont, we’ve won.”

“They’ll move.” Rattleshirt’s voice was thick and angry.

Mance nodded, and walked away, Harma and Sixskins beside him. Varamyr’s wolves and shadowcat followed behind. Jon and Ygritte were left with Jarl, Rattleshirt, and the Magnar. The two older wildlings looked at Jon with ill-concealed rancor as Jarl said, “You heard, we ride at daybreak. Bring all the food you can, there’ll be no time to hunt. And have your face seen to, crow. You look a bloody mess.”

“I will,” said Jon.

“You best not be lying, girl,” Rattleshirt said to Ygritte, his eyes shiny behind the giant’s skull.

Jon drew Longscaw. “Get away from us, unless you want what Qhorin got.”

“You got no wolf to help you here, boy.” Rattleshirt reached for his own sword.

“Sure o’ that, are you?” Ygritte laughed.

Atop the stones of the ringwall, Ghost hunched with white fur bristling. He made no sound, but his dark red eyes spoke blood. The Lord of Bones

moved his hand slowly away from his sword, backed off a step, and left them with a curse.

Ghost padded beside their garrons as Jon and Ygritte descended the Fist. It was not until they were halfway across the Milkwater that Jon felt safe enough to say, “I never asked you to lie for me.”

“I never did,” she said. “I left out part, is all.”

“You said—”

“—that we fuck beneath your cloak many a night. I never said when we started, though.” The smile she gave him was almost shy. “Find another place for Ghost to sleep tonight, Jon Snow. It’s like Mance said. Deeds is truer than words.”