

JON

His candle had guttered out in a pool of wax, but morning light was shining through the shutters of his window. Jon had fallen asleep over his work again. Books covered his table, tall stacks of them. He'd fetched them up himself, after spending half the night searching through dusty vaults by lantern light. Sam was right, the books desperately needed to be sorted, listed, and put in order, but that was no task for stewards who could neither read nor write. It would need to wait for Sam's return.

If he does return. Jon feared for Sam and Maester Aemon. Cotter Pyke had written from Eastwatch to report that the *Storm Crow* had sighted the wreckage of a galley along the coast of Skagos. Whether the broken ship was *Blackbird*, one of Stannis Baratheon's sellsails, or some passing trader, the crew of the *Storm Crow* had not been able to discern. *I meant to send Gilly and the babe to safety. Did I send them to their graves instead?*

Last night's supper had congealed beside his elbow, scarce touched. Dolorous Edd had filled his trencher almost to overflowing to allow Three-Finger Hobb's infamous three-meat stew to soften the stale bread. The jest among the brothers was that the three meats were mutton, mutton, and mutton, but carrot, onion, and turnip would have been closer to the mark. A film of cold grease glistened atop the remains of the stew.

Bowen Marsh had urged him to move into the Old Bear's former chambers in the King's Tower after Stannis vacated them, but Jon had declined. Moving into the king's chambers could too easily be taken to mean he did not expect the king to return.

A strange listlessness had settled over Castle Black since Stannis had marched south, as if the free folk and the black brothers alike were holding their breath, waiting to see what would come. The yards and dining hall were empty more oft than not, the Lord Commander's Tower was a shell, the old common hall a pile of blackened timbers, and Hardin's Tower looked as if the next gust of wind would knock it over. The only sound of life that Jon could hear was the faint clash of swords coming from the yard

outside the armory. Iron Emmett was shouting at Hop-Robin to keep his shield up. *We had all best keep our shields up.*

Jon washed and dressed and left the armory, stopping in the yard outside just long enough to say a few words of encouragement to Hop-Robin and Emmett's other charges. He declined Ty's offer of a tail, as usual. He would have men enough about him; if it came to blood, two more would hardly matter. He did take Longclaw, though, and Ghost followed at his heels.

By the time he reached the stable, Dolorous Edd had the lord commander's palfrey saddled and bridled and waiting for him. The wayns were forming up beneath Bowen Marsh's watchful eye. The Lord Steward was trotting down the column, pointing and fussing, his cheeks red from the cold. When he spied Jon, they reddened even more. "Lord Commander. Are you still intent on this ..."

"... folly?" finished Jon. "Please tell me you were not about to say *folly*, my lord. Yes, I am. We have been over this. Eastwatch wants more men. The Shadow Tower wants more men. Greyguard and Icemark as well, I have no doubt, and we have fourteen other castles still sitting empty, long leagues of Wall that remain unwatched and undefended."

Marsh pursed his lips. "Lord Commander Mormont—"

"—is dead. And not at wildling hands, but at the hands of his own Sworn Brothers, men he trusted. Neither you nor I can know what he would or would not have done in my place." Jon wheeled his horse around. "Enough talk. Away."

Dolorous Edd had heard the entire exchange. As Bowen Marsh trotted off, he nodded toward his back and said, "Pomegranates. All those seeds. A man could choke to death. I'd sooner have a turnip. Never knew a turnip to do a man any harm."

It was at times like this that Jon missed Maester Aemon the most. Clydas tended to the ravens well enough, but he had not a tenth of Aemon Targaryen's knowledge or experience, and even less of his wisdom. Bowen was a good man in his way, but the wound he had taken at the Bridge of

Skulls had hardened his attitudes, and the only song he ever sang now was his familiar refrain about sealing the gates. Othell Yarwyck was as stolid and unimaginative as he was taciturn, and the First Rangers seemed to die as quick as they were named. *The Night's Watch has lost too many of its best men*, Jon reflected, as the wagons began to move. *The Old Bear, Qhorin Halfhand, Donal Noye, Jarmen Buckwell, my uncle ...*

A light snow began to fall as the column made its way south along the kingsroad, the long line of wagons wending past fields and streams and wooded hillsides, with a dozen spearmen and a dozen archers riding escort. The last few trips had seen some ugliness at Mole's Town, a little pushing and shoving, some muttered curses, a lot of sullen looks. Bowen Marsh felt it best not to take chances, and for once he and Jon were agreed.

The Lord Steward led the way. Jon rode a few yards back, Dolorous Edd Tollett at his side. Half a mile south of Castle Black, Edd urged his garron close to Jon's and said, "M'lord? Look up there. The big drunkard on the hill."

The drunkard was an ash tree, twisted sideways by centuries of wind. And now it had a face. A solemn mouth, a broken branch for a nose, two eyes carved deep into the trunk, gazing north up the kingsroad, toward the castle and the Wall.

The wildlings brought their gods with them after all. Jon was not surprised. Men do not give up their gods so easily. The whole pageant that Lady Melisandre had orchestrated beyond the Wall suddenly seemed as empty as a mummer's farce. "Looks a bit like you, Edd," he said, trying to make light of it.

"Aye, m'lord. I don't have leaves growing out my nose, but else-wise ... Lady Melisandre won't be happy."

"She's not like to see it. See that no one tells her."

"She sees things in those fires, though."

"Smoke and cinders."

“And people burning. Me, most like. With leaves up my nose. I always feared I’d burn, but I was hoping to die first.”

Jon glanced back at the face, wondering who had carved it. He had posted guards around Mole’s Town, both to keep his crows away from the wildling women and to keep the free folk from slipping off southward to raid. Whoever had carved up the ash had eluded his sentries, plainly. And if one man could slip through the cordon, others could as well. *I could double the guard again*, he thought sourly. *Waste twice as many men, men who might otherwise be walking the Wall.*

The wagons continued on their slow way south through frozen mud and blowing snow. A mile farther on, they came upon a second face, carved into a chestnut tree that grew beside an icy stream, where its eyes could watch the old plank bridge that spanned its flow. “Twice as much trouble,” announced Dolorous Edd.

The chestnut was leafless and skeletal, but its bare brown limbs were not empty. On a low branch overhanging the stream a raven sat hunched, its feathers ruffled up against the cold. When it spied Jon it spread its wings and gave a scream. When he raised his fist and whistled, the big black bird came flapping down, crying, “*Corn, corn, corn.*”

“Corn for the free folk,” Jon told him. “None for you.” He wondered if they would all be reduced to eating ravens before the coming winter had run its course.

The brothers on the wagons had seen this face as well, Jon did not doubt. No one spoke of it, but the message was plain to read for any man with eyes. Jon had once heard Mance Rayder say that most kneelers were sheep. “Now, a dog can herd a flock of sheep,” the King-Beyond-the-Wall had said, “but free folk, well, some are shadowcats and some are stones. One kind prowls where they please and will tear your dogs to pieces. The other will not move at all unless you kick them.” Neither shadowcats nor stones were like to give up the gods they had worshiped all their lives to bow down before one they hardly knew.

Just north of Mole's Town they came upon the third watcher, carved into the huge oak that marked the village perimeter, its deep eyes fixed upon the kingsroad. *That is not a friendly face*, Jon Snow reflected. The faces that the First Men and the children of the forest had carved into the weirwoods in eons past had stern or savage visages more oft than not, but the great oak looked especially angry, as if it were about to tear its roots from the earth and come roaring after them. *Its wounds are as fresh as the wounds of the men who carved it.*

Mole's Town had always been larger than it seemed; most of it was underground, sheltered from the cold and snow. That was more true than ever now. The Magnar of Thenn had put the empty village to the torch when he passed through on his way to attack Castle Black, and only heaps of blackened beams and old scorched stones remained aboveground ... but down beneath the frozen earth, the vaults and tunnels and deep cellars still endured, and that was where the free folk had taken refuge, huddled together in the dark like the moles from which the village took its name.

The wagons drew up in a crescent in front of what had once been the village smithy. Nearby a swarm of red-faced children were building a snow fort, but they scattered at the sight of the black-cloaked brothers, vanishing down one hole or another. A few moments later the adults began to emerge from the earth. A stench came with them, the smell of unwashed bodies and soiled clothing, of nightsoil and urine. Jon saw one of his men wrinkle his nose and say something to the man beside him. *Some jape about the smell of freedom*, he guessed. Too many of his brothers were making japes about the stench of the savages in Mole's Town.

Pig ignorance, Jon thought. The free folk were no different than the men of the Night's Watch; some were clean, some dirty, but most were clean at times and dirty at other times. This stink was just the smell of a thousand people jammed into cellars and tunnels that had been dug to shelter no more than a hundred.

The wildlings had done this dance before. Wordless, they formed up in lines behind the wagons. There were three women for every man, many with children—pale skinny things clutching at their skirts. Jon saw very few

babes in arms. *The babes in arms died during the march, he realized, and those who survived the battle died in the king's stockade.*

The fighters had fared better. Three hundred men of fighting age, Justin Massey had claimed in council. Lord Harwood Fell had counted them. *There will be spearwives too. Fifty, sixty, maybe as many as a hundred.* Fell's count had included men who had suffered wounds, Jon knew. He saw a score of those—men on crude crutches, men with empty sleeves and missing hands, men with one eye or half a face, a legless man carried between two friends. And every one grey-faced and gaunt. *Broken men*, he thought. *The wights are not the only sort of living dead.*

Not all the fighting men were broken, though. Half a dozen Thenns in bronze scale armor stood clustered round one cellar stair, watching sullenly and making no attempt to join the others. In the ruins of the old village smithy Jon spied a big bald slab of a man he recognized as Halleck, the brother of Harma Dogshead. Harma's pigs were gone, though. *Eaten, no doubt.* Those two in furs were Hornfoot men, as savage as they were scrawny, barefoot even in the snow. *There are wolves amongst these sheep, still.*

Val had reminded him of that, on his last visit with her. "Free folk and kneelers are more alike than not, Jon Snow. Men are men and women women, no matter which side of the Wall we were born on. Good men and bad, heroes and villains, men of honor, liars, cravens, brutes ... we have plenty, as do you."

She was not wrong. The trick was telling one from the other, parting the sheep from the goats.

The black brothers began to pass out food. They'd brought slabs of hard salt beef, dried cod, dried beans, turnips, carrots, sacks of barley meal and wheaten flour, pickled eggs, barrels of onions and apples. "You can have an onion or an apple," Jon heard Hairy Hal tell one woman, "but not both. You got to pick."

The woman did not seem to understand. "I need two of each. One o' each for me, t'others for my boy. He's sick, but an apple will set him right."

Hal shook his head. “He has to come get his own apple. Or his onion. Not both. Same as you. Now, is it an apple or an onion? Be quick about it, now, there’s more behind you.”

“An apple,” she said, and he gave her one, an old dried thing, small and withered.

“Move along, woman,” shouted a man three places back. “It’s cold out here.”

The woman paid the shout no mind. “Another apple,” she said to Hairy Hal. “For my son. Please. This one is so little.”

Hal looked to Jon. Jon shook his head. They would be out of apples soon enough. If they started giving two to everyone who wanted two, the latecomers would get none.

“Out of the way,” a girl behind the woman said. Then she shoved her in the back. The woman staggered, lost her apple, and fell. The other foodstuffs in her arms went flying. Beans scattered, a turnip rolled into a mud puddle, a sack of flour split and spilled its precious contents in the snow.

Angry voices rose, in the Old Tongue and the Common. More shoving broke out at another wagon. “It’s not *enough*,” an old man snarled. “You bloody crows are starving us to death.” The woman who’d been knocked down was scrabbling on her knees after her food. Jon saw the flash of naked steel a few yards away. His own bowmen nocked arrows to their strings.

He turned in his saddle. “Rory. Quiet them.”

Rory lifted his great horn to his lips and blew.

AAAAhoo.

The tumult and the shoving died. Heads turned. A child began to cry. Mormont’s raven walked from Jon’s left shoulder to his right, bobbing its head and muttering, “*Snow, snow, snow.*”

Jon waited until the last echoes had faded, then spurred his palfrey forward where everyone could see him. “We’re feeding you as best we can, as much as we can spare. Apples, onions, neeps, carrots ... there’s a long winter ahead for all of us, and our stores are not inexhaustible.”

“You crows eat good enough.” Halleck shoved forward.

For now. “We hold the Wall. The Wall protects the realm ... and you now. You know the foe we face. You know what’s coming down on us. Some of you have faced them before. Wights and white walkers, dead things with blue eyes and black hands. I’ve seen them too, fought them, sent one to hell. They kill, then they send your dead against you. The giants were not able to stand against them, nor you Thenns, the ice-river clans, the Hornfoots, the free folk ... and as the days grow shorter and the nights colder, they are growing stronger. You left your homes and came south in your hundreds and your thousands ... why, but to escape them? To be safe. Well, it’s the Wall that keeps you safe. It’s *us* that keeps you safe, the black crows you despise.”

“Safe and starved,” said a squat woman with a windburned face, a spearwife by the look of her.

“You want more food?” asked Jon. “The food’s for fighters. Help us hold the Wall, and you’ll eat as well as any crow.” *Or as poorly, when the food runs short.*

A silence fell. The wildlings exchanged wary looks. “*Eat,*” the raven muttered. “*Corn, corn.*”

“Fight for you?” This voice was thickly accented. Sigorn, the young Magnar of Thenn, spoke the Common Tongue haltingly at best. “Not fight for you. Kill you better. Kill all you.”

The raven flapped its wings. “*Kill, kill.*”

Sigorn’s father, the old Magnar, had been crushed beneath the falling stair during his attack on Castle Black. *I would feel the same if someone asked me to make common cause with the Lannisters,* Jon told himself. “Your

father tried to kill us all,” he reminded Sigorn. “The Magnar was a brave man, yet he failed. And if he had succeeded ... who would hold the Wall?” He turned away from the Thenns. “Winterfell’s walls were strong as well, but Winterfell stands in ruins today, burned and broken. A wall is only as good as the men defending it.”

An old man with a turnip cradled against his chest said, “You kill us, you starve us, now you want t’ make us slaves.”

A chunky red-faced man shouted assent. “I’d sooner go naked than wear one o’ them black rags on my back.”

One of the spearwives laughed. “Even your wife don’t want to see *you* naked, Butts.”

A dozen voices all began to speak at once. The Thenns were shouting in the Old Tongue. A little boy began to cry. Jon Snow waited until all of it had died down, then turned to Hairy Hal and said, “Hal, what was it that you told this woman?”

Hal looked confused. “About the food, you mean? An apple or an onion? That’s all I said. They got to pick.”

“*You have to pick*,” Jon Snow repeated. “All of you. No one is asking you to take our vows, and I do not care what gods you worship. My own gods are the old gods, the gods of the North, but you can keep the red god, or the Seven, or any other god who hears your prayers. It’s spears we need. Bows. Eyes along the Wall.

“I will take any boy above the age of twelve who knows how to hold a spear or string a bow. I will take your old men, your wounded, and your cripples, even those who can no longer fight. There are other tasks they may be able to perform. Fletching arrows, milking goats, gathering fire-wood, mucking out our stables ... the work is endless. And yes, I will take your women too. I have no need of blushing maidens looking to be protected, but I will take as many spearwives as will come.”

“And girls?” a girl asked. She looked as young as Arya had, the last time Jon had seen her.

“Sixteen and older.”

“You’re taking boys as young as twelve.”

Down in the Seven Kingdoms boys of twelve were often pages or squires; many had been training at arms for years. Girls of twelve were children. *These are wildlings, though.* “As you will. Boys *and* girls as young as twelve. But only those who know how to obey an order. That goes for all of you. I will never ask you to kneel to me, but I will set captains over you, and serjeants who will tell you when to rise and when to sleep, where to eat, when to drink, what to wear, when to draw your swords and loose your arrows. The men of the Night’s Watch serve for life. I will not ask that of you, but so long as you are on the Wall you will be under my command. Disobey an order, and I’ll have your head off. Ask my brothers if I won’t. They’ve seen me do it.”

“*Off,*” screamed the Old Bear’s raven. “*Off, off, off.*”

“The choice is yours,” Jon Snow told them. “Those who want to help us hold the Wall, return to Castle Black with me and I’ll see you armed and fed. The rest of you, get your turnips and your onions and crawl back inside your holes.”

The girl was the first to come forward. “I can fight. My mother was a spearwife.” Jon nodded. *She may not even be twelve,* he thought, as she squirmed between a pair of old men, but he was not about to turn away his only recruit.

A pair of striplings followed her, boys no older than fourteen. Next a scarred man with a missing eye. “I seen them too, the dead ones. Even crows are better’n that.” A tall spearwife, an old man on crutches, a moon-faced boy with a withered arm, a young man whose red hair reminded Jon of Ygritte.

And then Halleck. “I don’t like you, crow,” he growled, “but I never liked the Mance neither, no more’n my sister did. Still, we fought for him. Why not fight for you?”

The dam broke then. Halleck was a man of note. *Mance was not wrong.* “Free folk don’t follow names, or little cloth animals sewn on a tunic,” the King-Beyond-the-Wall had told him. “They won’t dance for coins, they don’t care how you style yourself or what that chain of office means or who your grandsire was. They follow strength. They follow the man.”

Halleck’s cousins followed Halleck, then one of Harma’s banner-bearers, then men who’d fought with her, then others who had heard tales of their prowess. Greybeards and green boys, fighting men in their prime, wounded men and cripples, a good score of spearwives, even three Horn-foot men.

But no Thenns. The Magnar turned and vanished back into the tunnels, and his bronze-clad minions followed hard at his heels.

By the time the last withered apple had been handed out, the wagons were crowded with wildlings, and they were sixty-three stronger than when the column had set out from Castle Black that morning. “What will you do with them?” Bowen Marsh asked Jon on the ride back up the kingsroad.

“Train them, arm them, and split them up. Send them where they’re needed. Eastwatch, the Shadow Tower, Icemark, Greyguard. I mean to open three more forts as well.”

The Lord Steward glanced back. “Women too? Our brothers are not accustomed to having women amongst them, my lord. Their vows ... there will be fights, rapes ...”

“These women have knives and know how to use them.”

“And the first time one of these spearwives slits the throat of one of our brothers, what then?”

“We will have lost a man,” said Jon, “but we have just gained sixty-three. You’re good at counting, my lord. Correct me if I’m wrong, but my

reckoning leaves us sixty-two ahead.”

Marsh was unconvinced. “You’ve added sixty-three more mouths, my lord ... but how many are fighters, and whose side will they fight on? If it’s the Others at the gates, most like they’ll stand with us, I grant you ... but if it’s Tormund Giantsbane or the Weeping Man come calling with ten thousand howling killers, what then?”

“Then we’ll know. So let us hope it never comes to that.”