

JON

“Careful of the rats, my lord.” Dolorous Edd led Jon down the steps, a lantern in one hand. “They make an awful squeal if you step on them. My mother used to make a similar sound when I was a boy. She must have had some rat in her, now that I think of it. Brown hair, beady little eyes, liked cheese. Might be she had a tail too, I never looked to see.”

All of Castle Black was connected underground by a maze of tunnels that the brothers called *the wormways*. It was dark and gloomy underneath the earth, so the wormways were little used in summer, but when the winter winds began to blow and the snows began to fall, the tunnels became the quickest way to move about the castle. The stewards were making use of them already. Jon saw candles burning in several wall niches as they made their way along the tunnel, their footsteps echoing ahead of them.

Bowen Marsh was waiting at a junction where four wormways met. With him he had Wick Whittlestick, tall and skinny as a spear. “These are the counts from three turns ago,” Marsh told Jon, offering him a thick sheaf of papers, “for comparison with our present stores. Shall we start with the granaries?”

They moved through the grey gloom beneath the earth. Each storeroom had a solid oaken door closed with an iron padlock as big as a supper plate. “Is pilferage a problem?” Jon asked.

“Not as yet,” said Bowen Marsh. “Once winter comes, though, your lordship might be wise to post guards down here.”

Wick Whittlestick wore the keys on a ring about his neck. They all looked alike to Jon, yet somehow Wick found the right one for every door. Once inside, he would take a fist-sized chunk of chalk from his pouch and mark each cask and sack and barrel as he counted them while Marsh compared the new count to the old.

In the granaries were oats and wheat and barley, and barrels of coarse ground flour. In the root cellars strings of onions and garlic dangled from the rafters, and bags of carrots, parsnips, radishes, and white and yellow turnips filled the shelves. One storeroom held wheels of cheese so large it took two men to move them. In the next, casks of salt beef, salt pork, salt mutton, and salt cod were stacked ten feet high. Three hundred hams and three thousand long black sausages hung from ceiling beams below the smokehouse. In the spice locker they found peppercorns, cloves, and cinnamon, mustard seeds, coriander, sage and clary sage and parsley, blocks of salt. Elsewhere were casks of apples and pears, dried peas, dried figs, bags of walnuts, bags of chestnuts, bags of almonds, planks of dry smoked salmon, clay jars packed with olives in oil and sealed with wax. One storeroom offered potted hare, haunch of deer in honey, pickled cabbage, pickled beets, pickled onions, pickled eggs, and pickled herring.

As they moved from one vault to another, the wormways seemed to grow colder. Before long Jon could see their breath frosting in the lantern light. “We’re beneath the Wall.”

“And soon inside it,” said Marsh. “The meat won’t spoil in the cold. For long storage, it’s better than salting.”

The next door was made of rusty iron. Behind it was a flight of wooden steps. Dolorous Edd led the way with his lantern. Up top they found a tunnel as long as Winterfell’s great hall though no wider than the wormways. The walls were ice, bristling with iron hooks. From each hook hung a carcass: skinned deer and elk, sides of beef, huge sows swinging from the ceiling, headless sheep and goats, even horse and bear. Hoarfrost covered everything.

As they did their count, Jon peeled the glove off his left hand and touched the nearest haunch of venison. He could feel his fingers sticking, and when he pulled them back he lost a bit of skin. His fingertips were numb. *What did you expect? There’s a mountain of ice above your head, more tons than even Bowen Marsh could count.* Even so, the room felt colder than it should.

“It is worse than I feared, my lord,” Marsh announced when he was done. He sounded gloomier than Dolorous Edd.

Jon had just been thinking that all the meat in the world surrounded them. *You know nothing, Jon Snow.* “How so? This seems a deal of food to me.”

“It was a long summer. The harvests were bountiful, the lords generous. We had enough laid by to see us through three years of winter. Four, with a bit of scrimping. Now, though, if we must go on feeding all these king’s men and queen’s men and wildlings ... Mole’s Town alone has a thousand useless mouths, and still they come. Three more turned up yesterday at the gates, a dozen the day before. It cannot go on. Settling them on the Gift, that’s well and good, but it is too late to plant crops. We’ll be down to turnips and pease porridge before the year is out. After that we’ll be drinking the blood of our own horses.”

“Yum,” declared Dolorous Edd. “Nothing beats a hot cup of horse blood on a cold night. I like mine with a pinch of cinnamon sprinkled on top.”

The Lord Steward paid him no mind. “There will be sickness too,” he went on, “bleeding gums and loose teeth. Maester Aemon used to say that lime juice and fresh meat would remedy that, but our limes were gone a year ago and we do not have enough fodder to keep herds afoot for fresh meat. We should butcher all but a few breeding pairs. It’s past time. In winters past, food could be brought up the kingsroad from the south, but with the war ... it is still autumn, I know, but I would advise we go on winter rations nonetheless, if it please my lord.”

The men will love that. “If we must. We’ll cut each man’s portion by a quarter.” *If my brothers are complaining of me now, what will they say when they’re eating snow and acorn paste?*

“That will help, my lord.” The Lord Steward’s tone made it plain that he did not think that it would help *enough*.

Dolorous Edd said, “Now I understand why King Stannis let the wild-lings through the Wall. He means for us to eat them.”

Jon had to smile. "It will not come to that."

"Oh, good," said Edd. "They look a stringy lot, and my teeth are not as sharp as when I was younger."

"If we had sufficient coin, we could buy food from the south and bring it in by ship," the Lord Steward said.

We could, thought Jon, *if we had the gold, and someone willing to sell us food*. Both of those were lacking. *Our best hope may be the Eyrie*. The Vale of Arryn was famously fertile and had gone untouched during the fighting. Jon wondered how Lady Catelyn's sister would feel about feeding Ned Stark's bastard. As a boy, he often felt as if the lady grudged him every bite.

"We can always hunt if need be," Wick Whittlestick put in. "There's still game in the woods."

"And wildlings, and darker things," said Marsh. "I would not send out hunters, my lord. I would not."

No. You would close our gates forever and seal them up with stone and ice. Half of Castle Black agreed with the Lord Steward's views, he knew. The other half heaped scorn on them. "Seal our gates and plant your fat black arses on the Wall, aye, and the free folk'll come swarming o'er the Bridge o' Skulls or through some gate you thought you'd sealed five hundred years ago," the old forester Dywen had declared loudly over supper, two nights past. "We don't have the men to watch a hundred leagues o' Wall. Tormund Giantsbutt and the bloody Weeper knows it too. Ever see a duck frozen in a pond, with his feet in the ice? It works the same for crows." Most rangers echoed Dywen, whilst the stewards and builders inclined toward Bowen Marsh.

But that was a quandary for another day. Here and now, the problem was food. "We cannot leave King Stannis and his men to starve, even if we wished to," Jon said. "If need be, he could simply take all this at sword-point. We do not have the men to stop them. The wildlings must be fed as well."

“How, my lord?” asked Bowen Marsh.

Would that I knew. “We will find a way.”

By the time they returned to the surface, the shadows of the afternoon were growing long. Clouds streaked the sky like tattered banners, grey and white and torn. The yard outside the armory was empty, but inside Jon found the king’s squire awaiting him. Devan was a skinny lad of some twelve years, brown of hair and eye. They found him frozen by the forge, hardly daring to move as Ghost sniffed him up and down. “He won’t hurt you,” Jon said, but the boy flinched at the sound of his voice, and that sudden motion made the direwolf bare his teeth. “*No!*” Jon said. “Ghost, leave him be. *Away.*” The wolf slunk back to his ox bone, silence on four feet.

Devan looked as pale as Ghost, his face damp with perspiration. “M-my lord. His Grace c-commands your presence.” The boy was clad in Baratheon gold and black, with the flaming heart of a queen’s man sewn above his own.

“You mean *requests*,” said Dolorous Edd. “His Grace *requests* the presence of the lord commander. That’s how I’d say it.”

“Leave it be, Edd.” Jon was in no mood for such squabbles. “Sir Richard and Ser Justin have returned,” said Devan. “Will you come, my lord?”

The wrong-way rangers. Massey and Horpe had ridden south, not north. Whatever they had learned did not concern the Night’s Watch, but Jon was curious all the same. “If it would please His Grace.” He followed the young squire back across the yard. Ghost padded after them until Jon said, “No. *Stay!*” Instead the direwolf ran off.

In the King’s Tower, Jon was stripped of his weapons and admitted to the royal presence. The solar was hot and crowded. Stannis and his captains were gathered over the map of the north. The wrong-way rangers were amongst them. Sigorn was there as well, the young Magnar of Thenn, clad in a leather hauberk sewn with bronze scales. Rattleshirt sat scratching at the manacle on his wrist with a cracked yellow fingernail. Brown stubble covered his sunken cheeks and receding chin, and strands of dirty hair hung

across his eyes. “Here he comes,” he said when he saw Jon, “the brave boy who slew Mance Rayder when he was caged and bound.” The big square-cut gem that adorned his iron cuff glimmered redly. “Do you like my ruby, Snow? A token o’ love from Lady Red.”

Jon ignored him and took a knee. “Your Grace,” announced the squire Devan, “I’ve brought Lord Snow.”

“I can see that. Lord Commander. You know my knights and captains, I believe.”

“I have that honor.” He had made it a point to learn all he could of the men around the king. *Queen’s men, all*. It struck Jon as odd that there were no king’s men about the king, but that seemed to be the way of it. The king’s men had incurred Stannis’s ire on Dragonstone if the talk Jon heard was true.

“There is wine. Or water boiled with lemons.”

“Thank you, but no.”

“As you wish. I have a gift for you, Lord Snow.” The king waved a hand at Rattleshirt. “Him.”

Lady Melisandre smiled. “You did say you wanted men, Lord Snow. I believe our Lord of Bones still qualifies.”

Jon was aghast. “Your Grace, this man cannot be trusted. If I keep him here, someone will slit his throat for him. If I send him ranging, he’ll just go back over to the wildlings.”

“Not me. I’m done with those bloody fools.” Rattleshirt tapped the ruby on his wrist. “Ask your red witch, bastard.”

Melisandre spoke softly in a strange tongue. The ruby at her throat throbbed slowly, and Jon saw that the smaller stone on Rattleshirt’s wrist was brightening and darkening as well. “So long as he wears the gem he is

bound to me, blood and soul,” the red priestess said. “This man will serve you faithfully. The flames do not lie, Lord Snow.”

Perhaps not, Jon thought, but you do.

“I’ll range for you, bastard,” Rattleshirt declared. “I’ll give you sage counsel or sing you pretty songs, as you prefer. I’ll even fight for you. Just don’t ask me to wear your cloak.”

You are not worthy of one, Jon thought, but he held his tongue. No good would come of squabbling before the king.

King Stannis said, “Lord Snow, tell me of Mors Umber.”

The Night’s Watch takes no part, Jon thought, but another voice within him said, Words are not swords. “The elder of the Greatjon’s uncles. Crow-food, they call him. A crow once took him for dead and pecked out his eye. He caught the bird in his fist and bit its head off. When Mors was young he was a fearsome fighter. His sons died on the Trident, his wife in childbed. His only daughter was carried off by wildlings thirty years ago.”

“That’s why he wants the head,” said Harwood Fell. “Can this man Mors be trusted?” asked Stannis.

Has Mors Umber bent the knee? “Your Grace should have him swear an oath before his heart tree.”

Godry the Giantslayer guffawed. “I had forgotten that you northmen worship trees.”

“What sort of god lets himself be pissed upon by dogs?” asked Farring’s crony Clayton Suggs.

Jon chose to ignore them. “Your Grace, might I know if the Umbers have declared for you?”

“Half of them, and only if I meet this Crowfood’s price,” said Stannis, in an irritated tone. “He wants Mance Rayder’s skull for a drinking cup, and he

wants a pardon for his brother, who has ridden south to join Bolton. Whoresbane, he's called."

Ser Godry was amused by that as well. "What names these northmen have! Did this one bite the head off some whore?"

Jon regarded him coolly. "You might say so. A whore who tried to rob him, fifty years ago in Oldtown." Odd as it might seem, old Hoarfrost Umber had once believed his youngest son had the makings of a maester. Mors loved to boast about the crow who took his eye, but Hother's tale was only told in whispers ... most like because the whore he'd disemboweled had been a man. "Have other lords declared for Bolton too?"

The red priestess slid closer to the king. "I saw a town with wooden walls and wooden streets, filled with men. Banners flew above its walls: a moose, a battle-axe, three pine trees, longaxes crossed beneath a crown, a horse's head with fiery eyes."

"Hornwood, Cerwyn, Tallhart, Ryswell, and Dustin," supplied Ser Clayton Suggs. "Traitors, all. Lapdogs of the Lannisters."

"The Ryswells and Dustins are tied to House Bolton by marriage," Jon informed him. "These others have lost their lords in the fighting. I do not know who leads them now. Crowfood is no lapdog, though. Your Grace would do well to accept his terms."

Stannis ground his teeth. "He informs me that Umber will not fight Umber, for any cause."

Jon was not surprised. "If it comes to swords, see where Hother's banner flies and put Mors on the other end of the line."

The Giantslayer disagreed. "You would make His Grace look weak. I say, show our strength. Burn Last Hearth to the ground and ride to war with Crowfood's head mounted on a spear, as a lesson to the next lord who presumes to offer half his homage."

“A fine plan if what you want is every hand in the north raised against you. Half is more than none. The Umbers have no love for the Boltons. If Whoresbane has joined the Bastard, it can only be because the Lannisters hold the Greatjon captive.”

“That is his pretext, not his reason,” declared Ser Godry. “If the nephew dies in chains, these uncles can claim his lands and lordship for themselves.”

“The Greatjon has sons and daughters both. In the north the children of a man’s body still come before his uncles, ser.”

“Unless they die. Dead children come last everywhere.”

“Suggest that in the hearing of Mors Umber, Ser Godry, and you will learn more of death than you might wish.”

“I have slain a giant, boy. Why should I fear some flea-ridden north-man who paints one on his shield?”

“The giant was running away. Mors won’t be.”

The big knight flushed. “You have a bold tongue in the king’s solar, boy. In the yard you sang a different song.”

“Oh, leave off, Godry,” said Ser Justin Massey, a loose-limbed, fleshy knight with a ready smile and a mop of flaxen hair. Massey had been one of the wrong-way rangers. “We all know what a big giant sword you have, I’m sure. No need for you to wave it in our faces yet again.”

“The only thing waving here is your tongue, Massey.”

“*Be quiet*,” Stannis snapped. “Lord Snow, attend me. I have lingered here in the hopes that the wildlings would be fool enough to mount another attack upon the Wall. As they will not oblige me, it is time I dealt with my other foes.”

“I see.” Jon’s tone was wary. *What does he want of me?* “I have no love for Lord Bolton or his son, but the Night’s Watch cannot take up arms against

them. Our vows prohibit—”

“I know all about your vows. Spare me your rectitude, Lord Snow, I have strength enough without you. I have a mind to march against the Dreadfort.” When he saw the shock on Jon’s face, he smiled. “Does that surprise you? Good. What surprises one Snow may yet surprise another. The Bastard of Bolton has gone south, taking Hother Umber with him. On that Mors Umber and Arnolf Karstark are agreed. That can only mean a strike at Moat Cailin, to open the way for his lord father to return to the north. The bastard must think I am too busy with the wildlings to trouble him. Well and good. The boy has shown me his throat. I mean to rip it out. Roose Bolton may regain the north, but when he does he will find that his castle, herds, and harvest all belong to me. If I take the Dreadfort unawares —”

“You won’t,” Jon blurted.

It was as if he whacked a wasps’ nest with a stick. One of the queen’s men laughed, one spat, one muttered a curse, and the rest all tried to talk at once. “The boy has milkwater in his veins,” said Ser Godry the Giant-slayer. And Lord Sweet huffed, “The craven sees an outlaw behind every blade of grass.”

Stannis raised a hand for silence. “Explain your meaning.”

Where to begin? Jon moved to the map. Candles had been placed at its corners to keep the hide from rolling up. A finger of warm wax was puddling out across the Bay of Seals, slow as a glacier. “To reach the Dreadfort, Your Grace must travel down the kingsroad past the Last River, turn south by east and cross the Lonely Hills.” He pointed. “Those are Umber lands, where they know every tree and every rock. The kingsroad runs along their western marches for a hundred leagues. Mors will cut your host to pieces unless you meet his terms and win him to your cause.”

“Very well. Let us say I do that.”

“That will bring you to the Dreadfort,” said Jon, “but unless your host can outmarch a raven or a line of beacon fires, the castle will know of your

approach. It will be an easy thing for Ramsay Bolton to cut off your retreat and leave you far from the Wall, without food or refuge, surrounded by your foes.”

“Only if he abandons his siege of Moat Cailin.”

“Moat Cailin will fall before you ever reach the Dreadfort. Once Lord Roose has joined his strength to Ramsay’s, they will have you outnumbered five to one.”

“My brother won battles at worse odds.”

“You assume Moat Cailin will fall quickly, Snow,” objected Justin Massey, “but the ironmen are doughty fighters, and I’ve heard it said that the Moat has never been taken.”

“*From the south.* A small garrison in Moat Cailin can play havoc with any army coming up the causeway, but the ruins are vulnerable from the north and east.” Jon turned back to Stannis. “Sire, this is a bold stroke, but the risk—” *The Night’s Watch takes no part. Baratheon or Bolton should be the same to me.* “If Roose Bolton should catch you beneath his walls with his main strength, it will be the end for all of you.”

“Risk is part of war,” declared Ser Richard Horpe, a lean knight with a ravaged face whose quilted doublet showed three death’s-head moths on a field of ash and bone. “Every battle is a gamble, Snow. The man who does nothing also takes a risk.”

“There are risks and risks, Ser Richard. This one ... it is too much, too soon, too far away. I know the Dreadfort. It is a strong castle, all of stone, with thick walls and massive towers. With winter coming you will find it well provisioned. Centuries ago, House Bolton rose up against the King in the North, and Harlon Stark laid siege to the Dreadfort. It took him two years to starve them out. To have any hope of taking the castle, Your Grace would need siege engines, towers, battering rams ...”

“Siege towers can be raised if need be,” Stannis said. “Trees can be felled for rams if rams are required. Arnolf Karstark writes that fewer than fifty

men remain at the Dreadfort, half of them servants. A strong castle weakly held is weak.”

“Fifty men inside a castle are worth five hundred outside.”

“That depends upon the men,” said Richard Horpe. “These will be greybeards and green boys, the men this bastard did not deem fit for battle. Our own men were blooded and tested on the Blackwater, and they are led by knights.”

“You saw how we went through the wildlings.” Ser Justin pushed back a lock of flaxen hair. “The Karstarks have sworn to join us at the Dreadfort, and we will have our wildlings as well. Three hundred men of fighting age. Lord Harwood made a count as they were passing through the gate. Their women fight as well.”

Stannis gave him a sour look. “Not for me, ser. I want no widows wailing in my wake. The women will remain here, with the old, the wounded, and the children. They will serve as hostages for the loyalty of their husbands and fathers. The wildling men will form my van. The Magnar will command them, with their own chiefs as serjeants. First, though, we must needs arm them.”

He means to plunder our armory, Jon realized. Food and clothing, land and castles, now weapons. He draws me in deeper every day. Words might not be swords, but *swords* were swords. “I could find three hundred spears,” he said, reluctantly. “Helms as well, if you’ll take them old and dented and red with rust.”

“Armor?” asked the Magnar. “Plate? Mail?”

“When Donal Noye died we lost our armorer.” The rest Jon left unspoken. *Give the wildlings mail and they’ll be twice as great a danger to the realm.*

“Boiled leather will suffice,” said Ser Godry. “Once we’ve tasted battle, the survivors can loot the dead.”

The few who live that long. If Stannis placed the free folk in the van, most would perish quickly. “Drinking from Mance Rayder’s skull may give Mors Umber pleasure, but seeing wildlings cross his lands will not. The free folk have been raiding the Umbers since the Dawn of Days, crossing the Bay of Seals for gold and sheep and women. One of those carried off was Crowfood’s *daughter*. Your Grace, leave the wildlings here. Taking them will only serve to turn my lord father’s bannermen against you.”

“Your father’s bannermen seem to have no liking for my cause in any case. I must assume they see me as ... what was it that you called me, Lord Snow? *Another doomed pretender?*” Stannis stared at the map. For a long moment the only sound was the king grinding his teeth. “Leave me. All of you. Lord Snow, remain.”

The brusque dismissal did not sit well with Justin Massey, but he had no choice but to smile and withdraw. Horpe followed him out, after giving Jon a measured look. Clayton Suggs drained his cup dry and muttered something to Harwood Fell that made the younger man laugh. *Boy* was part of it. Suggs was an upjumped hedge knight, as crude as he was strong. The last man to take his leave was Rattleshirt. At the door, he gave Jon a mocking bow, grinning through a mouthful of brown and broken teeth.

All of you did not seem to include Lady Melisandre. *The king’s red shadow.* Stannis called to Devan for more lemon water. When his cup was filled the king drank, and said, “Horpe and Massey aspire to your father’s seat. Massey wants the wildling princess too. He once served my brother Robert as squire and acquired his appetite for female flesh. Horpe will take Val to wife if I command it, but it is battle he lusts for. As a squire he dreamed of a white cloak, but Cersei Lannister spoke against him and Robert passed him over. Perhaps rightly. Ser Richard is too fond of killing. Which would you have as Lord of Winterfell, Snow? The smiler or the slayer?”

Jon said, “Winterfell belongs to my sister Sansa.”

“I have heard all I need to hear of Lady Lannister and her claim.” The king set the cup aside. “*You* could bring the north to me. Your father’s bannermen would rally to the son of Eddard Stark. Even Lord Too-Fat-to-Sit-a-Horse. White Harbor would give me a ready source of supply and a

secure base to which I could retreat at need. It is not too late to amend your folly, Snow. Take a knee and swear that bastard sword to me, and rise as Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North.”

How many times will he make me say it? “My sword is sworn to the Night’s Watch.”

Stannis looked disgusted. “Your father was a stubborn man as well. *Honor*, he called it. Well, honor has its costs, as Lord Eddard learned to his sorrow. If it gives you any solace, Horpe and Massey are doomed to disappointment. I am more inclined to bestow Winterfell upon Arnolf Karstark. A good northman.”

“A northman.” *Better a Karstark than a Bolton or a Greyjoy*, Jon told himself, but the thought gave him little solace. “The Karstarks abandoned my brother amongst his enemies.”

“After your brother took off Lord Rickard’s head. Arnolf was a thousand leagues away. He has Stark blood in him. The blood of Winterfell.”

“No more than half the other Houses of the north.”

“Those other Houses have not declared for me.”

“Arnolf Karstark is an old man with a crooked back, and even in his youth he was never the fighter Lord Rickard was. The rigors of the campaign may well kill him.”

“He has heirs,” Stannis snapped. “Two sons, six grandsons, some daughters. If Robert had fathered trueborn sons, many who are dead might still be living.”

“Your Grace would do better with Mors Crowfood.”

“The Dreadfort will be the proof of that.”

“Then you mean to go ahead with this attack?”

“Despite the counsel of the great Lord Snow? Aye. Horpe and Massey may be ambitious, but they are not wrong. I dare not sit idle whilst Roose Bolton’s star waxes and mine wanes. I must strike and show the north that I am still a man to fear.”

“The merman of Manderly was not amongst those banners Lady Melisandre saw in her fires,” Jon said. “If you had White Harbor and Lord Wyman’s knights ...”

“*If* is a word for fools. We have had no word from Davos. It may be he never reached White Harbor. Arnolf Karstark writes that the storms have been fierce upon the narrow sea. Be that as it may. I have no time to grieve, nor wait upon the whims of Lord Too-Fat. I must consider White Harbor lost to me. Without a son of Winterfell to stand beside me, I can only hope to win the north by battle. That requires stealing a leaf from my brother’s book. Not that Robert ever read one. I must deal my foes a mortal blow before they know that I am on them.”

Jon realized that his words were wasted. Stannis would take the Dreadfort or die in the attempt. *The Night’s Watch takes no part*, a voice said, but another replied, *Stannis fights for the realm, the ironmen for thralls and plunder*. “Your Grace, I know where you might find more men. Give me the wildlings, and I will gladly tell you where and how.”

“I gave you Rattleshirt. Be content with him.”

“I want them all.”

“Some of your own Sworn Brothers would have me believe that you are half a wildling yourself. Is it true?”

“To you they are only arrow fodder. I can make better use of them upon the Wall. Give them to me to do with as I will, and I’ll show you where to find your victory ... and men as well.”

Stannis rubbed the back of his neck. “You haggle like a crone with a codfish, Lord Snow. Did Ned Stark father you on some fishwife? How many men?”

“Two thousand. Perhaps three.”

“Three *thousand*? What manner of men are these?”

“Proud. Poor. Prickly where their honor is concerned but fierce fighters.”

“This had best not be some bastard’s trick. Will I trade three hundred fighters for three thousand? Aye, I will. I am not an utter fool. If I leave the girl with you as well, do I have your word that you will keep our princess closely?”

She is not a princess. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

“Do I need to make you swear an oath before a tree?”

“No.” *Was that a jape?* With Stannis, it was hard to tell. “Done, then. Now, where are these men?”

“You’ll find them here.” Jon spread his burned hand across the map, west of the kingsroad and south of the Gift.

“Those mountains?” Stannis grew suspicious. “I see no castles marked there. No roads, no towns, no villages.”

“The map is not the land, my father often said. Men have lived in the high valleys and mountain meadows for thousands of years, ruled by their clan chiefs. Petty lords, you would call them, though they do not use such titles amongst themselves. Clan champions fight with huge two-handed greatswords, while the common men sling stones and batter one another with staffs of mountain ash. A quarrelsome folk, it must be said. When they are not fighting one another, they tend their herds, fish the Bay of Ice, and breed the hardest mounts you’ll ever ride.”

“And they will fight for me, you believe?”

“If you ask them.”

“Why should I beg for what is owed me?”

“*Ask*, I said, not *beg*.” Jon pulled back his hand. “It is no good sending messages. Your Grace will need to go to them yourself. Eat their bread and salt, drink their ale, listen to their pipers, praise the beauty of their daughters and the courage of their sons, and you’ll have their swords. The clans have not seen a king since Torrhen Stark bent his knee. Your coming does them honor. *Command* them to fight for you, and they will look at one another and say, ‘Who is this man? He is no king of mine.’ ”

“How many clans are you speaking of?”

“Two score, small and large. Flint, Wull, Norrey, Liddle ... win Old Flint and Big Bucket, the rest will follow.”

“Big *Bucket*?”

“The Wull. He has the biggest belly in the mountains, and the most men. The Wulls fish the Bay of Ice and warn their little ones that ironmen will carry them off if they don’t behave. To reach them Your Grace must pass through the Norrey’s lands, however. They live the nearest to the Gift and have always been good friends to the Watch. I could give you guides.”

“Could?” Stannis missed little. “Or will?”

“Will. You’ll need them. And some sure-footed garrons too. The paths up there are little more than goat tracks.”

“Goat tracks?” The king’s eyes narrowed. “I speak of moving swiftly, and you waste my time with *goat tracks*?”

“When the Young Dragon conquered Dorne, he used a goat track to bypass the Dornish watchtowers on the Boneway.”

“I know that tale as well, but Daeron made too much of it in that vain-glorious book of his. Ships won that war, not goat tracks. Oakenfist broke the Planky Town and swept halfway up the Greenblood whilst the main Dornish strength was engaged in the Prince’s Pass.” Stannis drummed his fingers on the map. “These mountain lords will not hinder my passage?”

“Only with feasts. Each will try to outdo the others with his hospitality. My lord father said he never ate half so well as when visiting the clans.”

“For three thousand men, I suppose I can endure some pipes and porridge,” the king said, though his tone begrudged even that.

Jon turned to Melisandre. “My lady, fair warning. The old gods are strong in those mountains. The clansmen will not suffer insults to their heart trees.”

That seemed to amuse her. “Have no fear, Jon Snow, I will not trouble your mountain savages and their dark gods. My place is here with you and your brave brothers.”

That was the last thing Jon Snow would have wanted, but before he could object, the king said, “Where would you have me lead these stalwarts if not against the Dreadfort?”

Jon glanced down at the map. “Deepwood Motte.” He tapped it with a finger. “If Bolton means to fight the ironmen, so must you. Deepwood is a motte-and-bailey castle in the midst of thick forest, easy to creep up on unawares. A *wooden* castle, defended by an earthen dike and a palisade of logs. The going will be slower through the mountains, admittedly, but up there your host can move unseen, to emerge almost at the gates of Deepwood.”

Stannis rubbed his jaw. “When Balon Greyjoy rose the first time, I beat the ironmen at sea, where they are fiercest. On land, taken unawares ... aye. I have won a victory over the wildlings and their King-Beyond-the-Wall. If I can smash the ironmen as well, the north will know it has a king again.”

And I will have a thousand wildlings, thought Jon, and no way to feed even half that number.