

JON

Val waited by the gate in the predawn cold, wrapped up in a bearskin cloak so large it might well have fit Sam. Beside her was a garron, saddled and bridled, a shaggy grey with one white eye. Mully and Dolorous Edd stood with her, a pair of unlikely guards. Their breath frosted in the cold black air.

“You gave her a blind horse?” Jon said, incredulous. “He’s only half-blind, m’lord,” offered Mully. “Elsewise he’s sound enough.” He patted the garron on the neck.

“The horse may be half-blind, but I am not,” said Val. “I know where I must go.”

“My lady, you do not have to do this. The risk—”

“—is mine, Lord Snow. And I am no southron lady but a woman of the free folk. I know the forest better than all your black-cloaked rangers. It holds no ghosts for me.”

I hope not. Jon was counting on that, trusting that Val could succeed where Black Jack Bulwer and his companions had failed. She need fear no harm from the free folk, he hoped ... but both of them knew too well that wildlings were not the only ones waiting in the woods. “You have sufficient food?”

“Hard bread, hard cheese, oat cakes, salt cod, salt beef, salt mutton, and a skin of sweet wine to rinse all that salt out of my mouth. I will not die of hunger.”

“Then it’s time you were away.”

“You have my word, Lord Snow. I will return, with Tormund or without him.” Val glanced at the sky. The moon was but half-full. “Look for me on the first day of the full moon.”

“I will.” *Do not fail me*, he thought, *or Stannis will have my head*. “Do I have your word that you will keep our princess closely?” the king had said, and Jon had promised that he would. *Val is no princess, though. I told him that half a hundred times*. It was a feeble sort of evasion, a sad rag wrapped around his wounded word. His father would never have approved. *I am the sword that guards the realm of men*, Jon reminded himself, *and in the end, that must be worth more than one man’s honor*.

The road beneath the Wall was as dark and cold as the belly of an ice dragon and as twisty as a serpent. Dolorous Edd led them through with a torch in hand. Mully had the keys for the three gates, where bars of black iron as thick as a man’s arm closed off the passage. Spearmen at each gate knuckled their foreheads at Jon Snow but stared openly at Val and her garron.

When they emerged north of the Wall, through a thick door made of freshly hewn green wood, the wildling princess paused for a moment to gaze out across the snow-covered field where King Stannis had won his battle. Beyond, the haunted forest waited, dark and silent. The light of the half-moon turned Val’s honey-blond hair a pale silver and left her cheeks as white as snow. She took a deep breath. “The air tastes sweet.”

“My tongue is too numb to tell. All I can taste is cold.”

“Cold?” Val laughed lightly. “No. When it is cold it will hurt to breathe. When the Others come ...”

The thought was a disquieting one. Six of the rangers Jon had sent out were still missing. *It is too soon. They may yet be back*. But another part of him insisted, *They are dead, every man of them. You sent them out to die, and you are doing the same to Val*. “Tell Tormund what I’ve said.”

“He may not heed your words, but he will hear them.” Val kissed him lightly on the cheek. “You have my thanks, Lord Snow. For the half-blind horse, the salt cod, the free air. For hope.”

Their breath mingled, a white mist in the air. Jon Snow drew back and said, “The only thanks I want is—”

“—Tormund Giantsbane. Aye.” Val pulled up the hood of her bearskin. The brown pelt was well salted with grey. “Before I go, one question. Did you kill Jarl, my lord?”

“The Wall killed Jarl.”

“So I’d heard. But I had to be sure.”

“You have my word. I did not kill him.” *Though I might have if things had gone otherwise.*

“This is farewell, then,” she said, almost playfully.

Jon Snow was in no mood for it. *It is too cold and dark to play, and the hour is too late.* “Only for a time. You will return. For the boy, if for no other reason.”

“Craster’s son?” Val shrugged. “He is no kin to me.”

“I have heard you singing to him.”

“I was singing to myself. Am I to blame if he listens?” A faint smile brushed her lips. “It makes him laugh. Oh, very well. He is a sweet little monster.”

“Monster?”

“His milk name. I had to call him something. See that he stays safe and warm. For his mother’s sake, and mine. And keep him away from the red woman. She knows who he is. She sees things in her fires.”

Arya, he thought, hoping it was so. “Ashes and cinders.”

“Kings and dragons.”

Dragons again. For a moment Jon could almost see them too, coiling in the night, their dark wings outlined against a sea of flame. “If she knew, she would have taken the boy away from us. Dalla’s boy, not your monster. A

word in the king's ear would have been the end of it." *And of me. Stannis would have taken it for treason.* "Why let it happen if she knew?"

"Because it suited her. Fire is a fickle thing. No one knows which way a flame will go." Val put a foot into a stirrup, swung her leg over her horse's back, and looked down from the saddle. "Do you remember what my sister told you?"

"Yes." *A sword without a hilt, with no safe way to hold it.* But Melisandre had the right of it. Even a sword without a hilt is better than an empty hand when foes are all around you.

"Good." Val wheeled the garron toward the north. "The first night of the full moon, then." Jon watched her ride away wondering if he would ever see her face again. *I am no southron lady*, he could hear her say, *but a woman of the free folk.*

"I don't care what she says," muttered Dolorous Edd, as Val vanished behind a stand of soldier pines. "The air *is* so cold it hurts to breathe. I would stop, but that would hurt worse." He rubbed his hands together. "This is going to end badly."

"You say that of everything."

"Aye, m'lord. Usually I'm right."

Mully cleared his throat. "M'lord? The wildling princess, letting her go, the men may say—"

"—that I am half a wildling myself, a turncloak who means to sell the realm to our raiders, cannibals, and giants." Jon did not need to stare into a fire to know what was being said of him. The worst part was, they were not wrong, not wholly. "Words are wind, and the wind is always blowing at the Wall. Come."

It was still dark when Jon returned to his chambers behind the armory. Ghost was not yet back, he saw. *Still hunting.* The big white direwolf was gone more oft than not of late, ranging farther and farther in search of prey.

Between the men of the Watch and the wildlings down in Mole's Town, the hills and fields near Castle Black had been hunted clean, and there had been little enough game to begin with. *Winter is coming*, Jon reflected. *And soon, too soon*. He wondered if they would ever see a spring.

Dolorous Edd made the trek to the kitchens and soon was back with a tankard of brown ale and a covered platter. Under the lid Jon discovered three duck's eggs fried in drippings, a strip of bacon, two sausages, a blood pudding, and half a loaf of bread still warm from the oven. He ate the bread and half an egg. He would have eaten the bacon too, but the raven made off with it before he had the chance. "Thief," Jon said, as the bird flapped up to the lintel above the door to devour its prize.

"*Thief*," the raven agreed.

Jon tried a bite of sausage. He was washing the taste from his mouth with a sip of ale when Edd returned to tell him Bowen Marsh was without. "Othell's with him, and Septon Cellador."

That was quick. He wondered who was telling tales and if there was more than one. "Send them in."

"Aye, m'lord. You'll want to watch your sausages with this lot, though. They have a hungry look about them."

Hungry was not the word Jon would have used. Septon Cellador appeared confused and groggy and in dire need of some scales from the dragon that had flamed him, whilst First Builder Othell Yarwyck looked as if he had swallowed something he could not quite digest. Bowen Marsh was angry. Jon could see it in his eyes, the tightness around his mouth, the flush to those round cheeks. *That red is not from cold*. "Please sit," he said. "May I offer you food or drink?"

"We broke our fast in the commons," said Marsh. "I could do with more." Yarwyck eased himself down onto a chair. "Good of you to offer."

"Perhaps some wine?" said Septon Cellador. "*Corn*," screamed the raven from the lintel. "*Corn, corn*."

“Wine for the septon and a plate for our First Builder,” Jon told Dolorous Edd. “Nothing for the bird.” He turned back to his visitors. “You’re here about Val.”

“And other matters,” said Bowen Marsh. “The men have concerns, my lord.”

And who is it who appointed you to speak for them? “As do I. Othell, how goes the work at the Nightfort? I have had a letter from Ser Axell Florent, who styles himself the Queen’s Hand. He tells me that Queen Selyse is not pleased with her quarters at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and wishes to move into her husband’s new seat at once. Will that be possible?”

Yarwyck shrugged. “We’ve got most of the keep restored and put a roof back on the kitchens. She’d need food and furnishings and firewood, mind you, but it might serve. Not so many comforts as Eastwatch, to be sure. And a long way from the ships, should Her Grace wish to leave us, but ... aye, she could live there, though it will be years before the place looks a proper castle. Sooner if I had more builders.”

“I could offer you a giant.”

That gave Othell a start. “The monster in the yard?”

“His name is Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun, Leathers tells me. A lot to wrap a tongue around, I know. Leathers calls him Wun Wun, and that seems to serve.” Wun Wun was very little like the giants in Old Nan’s tales, those huge savage creatures who mixed blood into their morning porridge and devoured whole bulls, hair and hide and horns. This giant ate no meat at all, though he was a holy terror when served a basket of roots, crunching onions and turnips and even raw hard neeps between his big square teeth. “He’s a willing worker, though getting him to understand what you want is not always easy. He speaks the Old Tongue after a fashion, but nothing of the Common. Tireless, though, and his strength is prodigious. He could do the work of a dozen men.”

“I ... my lord, the men would never ... giants eat human flesh, I think ... no, my lord, I thank you, but I do not have the men to watch over such a

creature, he ...”

Jon Snow was unsurprised. “As you wish. We will keep the giant here.” Truth be told, he would have been loath to part with Wun Wun. *You know nothing, Jon Snow*, Ygritte might say, but Jon spoke with the giant whenever he could, through Leathers or one of the free folk they had brought back from the grove, and was learning much and more about his people and their history. He only wished that Sam were here to write the stories down.

That was not to say that he was blind to the danger Wun Wun represented. The giant would lash out violently when threatened, and those huge hands were strong enough to rip a man apart. He reminded Jon of Hodor. *Hodor twice as big, twice as strong, and half as clever. There’s a thought to sober even Septon Cellador. But if Tormund has giants with him, Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun may help us treat with them.*

Mormont’s raven muttered his annoyance as the door opened beneath him, heralding the return of Dolorous Edd with a flagon of wine and a plate of eggs and sausages. Bowen Marsh waited with obvious impatience as Edd poured, resuming only when he left again. “Tollett is a good man, and well liked, and Iron Emmett has been a fine master-at-arms,” he said then. “Yet the talk is that you mean to send them away.”

“We need good men at Long Barrow.”

“Whore’s Hole, the men have started calling it,” said Marsh, “but be that as it may. Is it true that you mean to replace Emmett with this savage Leathers as our master-at-arms? That is an office most oft reserved for knights, or rangers at the least.”

“Leathers *is* savage,” Jon agreed mildly. “I can attest to that. I’ve tried him in the practice yard. He’s as dangerous with a stone axe as most knights are with castle-forged steel. I grant you, he is not as patient as I’d like, and some of the boys are terrified of him ... but that’s not all for the bad. One day they’ll find themselves in a real fight, and a certain familiarity with terror will serve them well.”

“He’s a *wildling*.”

“He was, until he said the words. Now he is our brother. One who can teach the boys more than swordcraft. It would not hurt them to learn a few words of the Old Tongue and something of the ways of the free folk.”

“*Free*,” the raven muttered. “*Corn. King*.”

“The men do not trust him.”

Which men? Jon might have asked. *How many?* But that would lead him down a road he did not mean to ride. “I am sorry to hear that. Is there more?”

Septon Cellador spoke up. “This boy Satin. It’s said you mean to make him your steward and squire, in Tollett’s place. My lord, the boy’s a whore ... a ... dare I say ... a painted *catamite* from the brothels of Old-town.”

And you are a drunk. “What he was in Oldtown is none of our concern. He’s quick to learn and very clever. The other recruits started out despising him, but he won them over and made friends of them all. He’s fearless in a fight and can even read and write after a fashion. He should be capable of fetching me my meals and saddling my horse, don’t you think?”

“Most like,” said Bowen Marsh, stony-faced, “but the men do not like it. Traditionally the lord commander’s squires are lads of good birth being groomed for command. Does my lord believe the men of the Night’s Watch would ever follow a whore into battle?”

Jon’s temper flashed. “They have followed worse. The Old Bear left a few cautionary notes about certain of the men, for his successor. We have a cook at the Shadow Tower who was fond of raping septas. He burned a seven-pointed star into his flesh for every one he claimed. His left arm is stars from wrist to elbow, and stars mark his calves as well. At Eastwatch we have a man who set his father’s house afire and barred the door. His entire family burned to death, all nine. Whatever Satin may have done in Oldtown, he is our brother now, and he *will* be my squire.”

Septon Cellador drank some wine. Othell Yarwyck stabbed a sausage with his dagger. Bower Marsh sat red-faced. The raven flapped its wings and said, “*Corn, corn, kill.*” Finally the Lord Steward cleared his throat. “Your lordship knows best, I am sure. Might I ask about these corpses in the ice cells? They make the men uneasy. And to keep them *under guard*? Surely that is a waste of two good men, unless you fear that they ...”

“... will rise? I pray they do.”

Septon Cellador paled. “Seven save us.” Wine dribbled down his chin in a red line. “Lord Commander, wights are monstrous, unnatural creatures. Abominations before the eyes of the gods. You ... you cannot mean to try to *talk* with them?”

“*Can* they talk?” asked Jon Snow. “I think not, but I cannot claim to know. Monsters they may be, but they were men before they died. How much remains? The one I slew was intent on killing Lord Commander Mormont. Plainly it remembered who he was and where to find him.” Maester Aemon would have grasped his purpose, Jon did not doubt; Sam Tarly would have been terrified, but he would have understood as well. “My lord father used to tell me that a man must know his enemies. We understand little of the wights and less about the Others. We need to learn.”

That answer did not please them. Septon Cellador fingered the crystal that hung about his neck and said, “I think this most unwise, Lord Snow. I shall pray to the Crone to lift her shining lamp and lead you down the path of wisdom.”

Jon Snow’s patience was exhausted. “We could all do with a bit more wisdom, I am sure.” *You know nothing, Jon Snow.* “Now, shall we speak of Val?”

“It is true, then?” said Marsh. “You have released her.”

“Beyond the Wall.”

Septon Cellador sucked in his breath. “The king’s prize. His Grace will be most wroth to find her gone.”

“Val will return.” *Before Stannis, if the gods are good.* “How can you know that?” demanded Bowen Marsh. “She said she would.”

“And if she lied? If she meets with misadventure?”

“Why, then, you may have a chance to choose a lord commander more to your liking. Until such time, I fear you’ll still need to suffer me.” Jon took a swallow of ale. “I sent her to find Tormund Giantsbane and bring him my offer.”

“If we may know, what offer is this?”

“The same offer I made at Mole’s Town. Food and shelter and peace, if he will join his strength to ours, fight our common enemy, help us hold the Wall.”

Bowen Marsh did not appear surprised. “You mean to let him pass.” His voice suggested he had known all along. “To open the gates for him and his followers. Hundreds, thousands.”

“If he has that many left.”

Septon Cellador made the sign of the star. Othell Yarwyck grunted. Bowen Marsh said, “Some might call this treason. These are wildlings. Savages, raiders, rapers, more beast than man.”

“Tormund is none of those things,” said Jon, “no more than Mance Rayder. But even if every word you said was true, they are still men, Bowen. Living men, human as you and me. Winter is coming, my lords, and when it does, we living men will need to stand together against the dead.”

“*Snow*,” screamed Lord Mormont’s raven. “*Snow, Snow.*”

Jon ignored him. “We have been questioning the wildlings we brought back from the grove. Several of them told an interesting tale, of a woods witch called Mother Mole.”

“Mother *Mole*?” said Bowen Marsh. “An unlikely name.”

“Supposedly she made her home in a burrow beneath a hollow tree. Whatever the truth of that, she had a vision of a fleet of ships arriving to carry the free folk to safety across the narrow sea. Thousands of those who fled the battle were desperate enough to believe her. Mother Mole has led them all to Hardhome, there to pray and await salvation from across the sea.”

Othell Yarwyck scowled. “I’m no ranger, but ... Hardhome is an un-holy place, it’s said. Cursed. Even your uncle used to say as much, Lord Snow. Why would they go *there*?”

Jon had a map before him on the table. He turned it so they could see. “Hardhome sits on a sheltered bay and has a natural harbor deep enough for the biggest ships afloat. Wood and stone are plentiful near there. The waters teem with fish, and there are colonies of seals and sea cows close at hand.”

“All that’s true, I don’t doubt,” said Yarwyck, “but it’s not a place I’d want to spend a night. You know the tale.”

He did. Hardhome had been halfway toward becoming a town, the only true town north of the Wall, until the night six hundred years ago when hell had swallowed it. Its people had been carried off into slavery or slaughtered for meat, depending on which version of the tale you believed, their homes and halls consumed in a conflagration that burned so hot that watchers on the Wall far to the south had thought the sun was rising in the north. Afterward ashes rained down on haunted forest and Shivering Sea alike for almost half a year. Traders reported finding only nightmarish devastation where Hardhome had stood, a landscape of charred trees and burned bones, waters choked with swollen corpses, blood-chilling shrieks echoing from the cave mouths that pocked the great cliff that loomed above the settlement.

Six centuries had come and gone since that night, but Hardhome was still shunned. The wild had reclaimed the site, Jon had been told, but rangers claimed that the overgrown ruins were haunted by ghouls and demons and burning ghosts with an unhealthy taste for blood. “It is not the sort of refuge I’d chose either,” Jon said, “but Mother Mole was heard to preach that the free folk would find salvation where once they found damnation.”

Septon Cellador pursed his lips. "Salvation can be found only through the Seven. This witch has doomed them all."

"And saved the Wall, mayhaps," said Bowen Marsh. "These are enemies we speak of. Let them pray amongst the ruins, and if their gods send ships to carry them off to a better world, well and good. In this world I have no food to feed them."

Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand. "Cotter Pyke's galleys sail past Hardhome from time to time. He tells me there is no shelter there but the caves. *The screaming caves*, his men call them. Mother Mole and those who followed her will perish there, of cold and starvation. Hundreds of them. Thousands."

"Thousands of enemies. Thousands of *wildlings*."

Thousands of people, Jon thought. *Men, women, children*. Anger rose inside him, but when he spoke his voice was quiet and cold. "Are you so blind, or is it that you do not wish to see? What do you think will happen when all these enemies are dead?"

Above the door the raven muttered, "*Dead, dead, dead*."

"Let me tell you what will happen," Jon said. "The dead will rise again, in their hundreds and their thousands. They will rise as wights, with black hands and pale blue eyes, and *they will come for us*." He pushed himself to his feet, the fingers of his sword hand opening and closing. "You have my leave to go."

Septon Cellador rose grey-faced and sweating, Othell Yarwyck stiffly, Bowen Marsh tight-lipped and pale. "Thank you for your time, Lord Snow." They left without another word.