



JON

The wind was blowing wild from the east, so strong the heavy cage would rock whenever a gust got it in its teeth. It skirled along the Wall, shivering off the ice, making Jon's cloak flap against the bars. The sky was slate grey, the sun no more than a faint patch of brightness behind the clouds. Across the killing ground, he could see the glimmer of a thousand campfires burning, but their lights seemed small and powerless against such gloom and cold.

A grim day. Jon Snow wrapped gloved hands around the bars and held tight as the wind hammered at the cage once more. When he looked straight down past his feet, the ground was lost in shadow, as if he were being lowered into some bottomless pit. *Well, death is a bottomless pit of sorts,* he reflected, *and when this day's work is done my name will be shadowed forever.*

Bastard children were born from lust and lies, men said; their nature was wanton and treacherous. Once Jon had meant to prove them wrong, to show his lord father that he could be as good and true a son as Robb. *I made a botch of that.* Robb had become a hero king; if Jon was remembered at all, it would be as a turncloak, an oathbreaker, and a murderer. He was glad that Lord Eddard was not alive to see his shame.

I should have stayed in that cave with Ygritte. If there was a life beyond this one, he hoped to tell her that. *She will claw my face the way the eagle*

did, and curse me for a coward, but I'll tell her all the same. He flexed his sword hand, as Maester Aemon had taught him. The habit had become part of him, and he would need his fingers to be limber to have even half a chance of murdering Mance Rayder.

They had pulled him out this morning, after four days in the ice, locked up in a cell five by five by five, too low for him to stand, too tight for him to stretch out on his back. The stewards had long ago discovered that food and meat kept longer in the icy storerooms carved from the base of the Wall . . . but prisoners did not. "You will die in here, Lord Snow," Ser Alliser had said just before he closed the heavy wooden door, and Jon had believed it. But this morning they had come and pulled him out again, and marched him cramped and shivering back to the King's Tower, to stand before jowly Janos Slynt once more

"That old maester says I cannot hang you," Slynt declared. "He has written Cotter Pyke, and even had the bloody gall to show me the letter. He says you are no turncloak."

"Aemon's lived too long, my lord," Ser Alliser assured him. "His wits have gone dark as his eyes."

"Aye," Slynt said. "A blind man with a chain about his neck, who does he think he is?"

Aemon Targaryen, Jon thought, a king's son and a king's brother and a king who might have been. But he said nothing.

"Still," Slynt said, "I will not have it said that Janos Slynt hanged a man unjustly. I will not. I have decided to give you one last chance to prove you are as loyal as you claim, Lord Snow. One last chance to do your duty, yes!" He stood. "Mance Rayder wants to parley with us. He knows he has no chance now that Janos Slynt has come, so he wants to talk, this King-beyond-the-Wall. But the man is craven, and will not come to us. No doubt he knows I'd hang him. Hang him by his feet from the top of the Wall, on a rope two hundred feet long! But he will not come. He asks that we send an envoy to him."

"We're sending you, Lord Snow." Ser Alliser smiled.

"Me." Jon's voice was flat. "Why me?"

“You rode with these wildlings,” said Thorne. “Mance Rayder knows you. He will be more inclined to trust you.”

That was so wrong Jon might have laughed. “You’ve got it backward. Mance suspected me from the first. If I show up in his camp wearing a black cloak again and speaking for the Night’s Watch, he’ll know that I betrayed him.”

“He asked for an envoy, we are sending one,” said Slynt. “If you are too craven to face this turncloak king, we can return you to your ice cell. This time without the furs, I think. Yes.”

“No need for that, my lord,” said Ser Alliser. “Lord Snow will do as we ask. He wants to show us that he is no turncloak. He wants to prove himself a loyal man of the Night’s Watch.”

Thorne was much the more clever of the two, Jon realized; this had his stink all over it. He was trapped. “I’ll go,” he said in a clipped, curt voice.

“*M’lord*,” Janos Slynt reminded him. “You’ll address me—”

“I’ll go, *my lord*. But you are making a mistake, *my lord*. You are sending the wrong man, *my lord*. Just the sight of me is going to anger Mance. *My lord* would have a better chance of reaching terms if he sent—”

“Terms?” Ser Alliser chuckled.

“Janos Slynt does not make terms with lawless savages, Lord Snow. No, he does not.”

“We’re not sending you to *talk* with Mance Rayder,” Ser Alliser said. “We’re sending you to kill him.”

The wind whistled through the bars, and Jon Snow shivered. His leg was throbbing, and his head. He was not fit to kill a kitten, yet here he was. *The trap had teeth*. With Maester Aemon insisting on Jon’s innocence, Lord Janos had not dared to leave him in the ice to die. This was better. “Our honor means no more than our lives, so long as the realm is safe,” Qhorin Halfhand had said in the Frostfangs. He must remember that. Whether he slew Mance or only tried and failed, the free folk would kill him. Even desertion was impossible, if he’d been so inclined; to Mance he was a proven liar and betrayer.

When the cage jerked to a halt, Jon swung down onto the ground and rattled Longclaw's hilt to loosen the bastard blade in its scabbard. The gate was a few yards to his left, still blocked by the splintered ruins of the turtle, the carcass of a mammoth ripening within. There were other corpses too, strewn amidst broken barrels, hardened pitch, and patches of burnt grass, all shadowed by the Wall. Jon had no wish to linger here. He started walking toward the wildling camp, past the body of a dead giant whose head had been crushed by a stone. A raven was pulling out bits of brain from the giant's shattered skull. It looked up as he walked by. "*Snow*," it screamed at him. "*Snow, snow*." Then it opened its wings and flew away.

No sooner had he started out than a lone rider emerged from the wildling camp and came toward him. He wondered if Mance was coming out to parley in no-man's-land. *That might make it easier, though nothing will make it easy.* But as the distance between them diminished Jon saw that the horseman was short and broad, with gold rings glinting on thick arms and a white beard spreading out across his massive chest.

"*Har!*" Tormund boomed when they came together. "Jon Snow the crow. I feared we'd seen the last o' you."

"I never knew you feared anything, Tormund."

That made the wildling grin. "Well said, lad. I see your cloak is black. Mance won't like that. If you've come to change sides again, best climb back on that Wall o' yours."

"They've sent me to treat with the King-beyond-the-Wall."

"Treat?" Tormund laughed. "Now there's a word. *Har!* Mance wants to talk, that's true enough. Can't say he'd want to talk with *you*, though."

"I'm the one they've sent."

"I see that. Best come along, then. You want to ride?"

"I can walk."

"You fought us hard here." Tormund turned his garron back toward the wildling camp. "You and your brothers. I give you that. Two hundred dead, and a dozen giants. Mag himself went in that gate o' yours and never did come out."

"He died on the sword of a brave man named Donal Noye."

“Aye? Some great lord was he, this Donal Noye? One of your shiny knights in their steel smallclothes?”

“A blacksmith. He only had one arm.”

“A one-armed smith slew Mag the Mighty? Har! That must o’ been a fight to see. Mance will make a song of it, see if he don’t.” Tormund took a waterskin off his saddle and pulled the cork. “This will warm us some. To Donal Noye, and Mag the Mighty.” He took a swing, and handed it down to Jon.

“To Donal Noye, and Mag the Mighty.” The skin was full of mead, but a mead so potent that it made Jon’s eyes water and sent tendrils of fire snaking through his chest. After the ice cell and the cold ride down in the cage, the warmth was welcome.

Tormund took the skin back and downed another swig, then wiped his mouth. “The Magnar of Thenn swore t’us that he’d have the gate wide open, so all we’d need to do was stroll through singing. He was going to bring the whole Wall down.”

“He brought down part,” Jon said. “On his head.”

“Har!” said Tormund. “Well, I never had much use for Styr. When a man’s got no beard nor hair nor ears, you can’t get a good grip on him when you fight.” He kept his horse at a slow walk so Jon could limp beside him. “What happened to that leg?”

“An arrow. One of Ygritte’s, I think.”

“That’s a woman for you. One day she’s kissing you, the next she’s filling you with arrows.”

“She’s dead.”

“Aye?” Tormund gave a sad shake of the head. “A waste. If I’d been ten years younger, I’d have stolen her meself. That hair she had. Well, the hottest fires burn out quickest.” He lifted the skin of mead. “To Ygritte, kissed by fire!” He drank deep.

“To Ygritte, kissed by fire,” Jon repeated when Tormund handed him back the skin. He drank even deeper.

“Was it you killed her?”

“My brother.” Jon had never learned which one, and hoped he never would.

“You bloody crows.” Tormund’s tone was gruff, yet strangely gentle. “That Longspear stole me daughter. Munda, me little autumn apple. Took her right out o’ my tent with all four o’ her brothers about. Toregg slept through it, the great lout, and Torwynd . . . well, Torwynd the Tame, that says all that needs saying, don’t it? The young ones gave the lad a fight, though.”

“And Munda?” asked Jon.

“She’s my own blood,” said Tormund proudly. “She broke his lip for him and bit one ear half off, and I hear he’s got so many scratches on his back he can’t wear a cloak. She likes him well enough, though. And why not? He don’t fight with no spear, you know. Never has. So where do you think he got that name? *Har!*”

Jon had to laugh. Even now, even here. Ygritte had been fond of Longspear Ryk. He hoped he found some joy with Tormund’s Munda. Someone needed to find some joy somewhere.

“You know nothing, Jon Snow,” Ygritte would have told him. *I know that I am going to die*, he thought. *I know that much, at least*. “All men die,” he could almost hear her say, “and women too, and every beast that flies or swims or runs. It’s not the *when* o’ dying that matters, it’s the *how* of it, Jon Snow.” *Easy for you to say*, he thought back. *You died brave in battle, storming the castle of a foe. I’m going to die a turncloak and a killer*. Nor would his death be quick, unless it came on the end of Mance’s sword.

Soon they were among the tents. It was the usual wildling camp; a sprawling jumble of cookfires and piss pits, children and goats wandering freely, sheep bleating among the trees, horse hides pegged up to dry. There was no plan to it, no order, no defenses. But there were men and women and animals everywhere.

Many ignored him, but for every one who went about his business there were ten who stopped to stare; children squatting by the fires, old women in dog carts, cave dwellers with painted faces, raiders with claws and snakes and severed heads painted on their shields, all turned to have a look. Jon

saw spearwives too, their long hair streaming in the piney wind that sighed between the trees.

There were no true hills here, but Mance Rayder's white fur tent had been raised on a spot of high stony ground right on the edge of the trees. The King-beyond-the-Wall was waiting outside, his ragged red-and-black cloak blowing in the wind. Harma Dogshead was with him, Jon saw, back from her raids and feints along the Wall, and Varamyr Sixskins as well, attended by his shadowcat and two lean grey wolves.

When they saw who the Watch had sent, Harma turned her head and spat, and one of Varamyr's wolves bared its teeth and growled. "You must be very brave or very stupid, Jon Snow," Mance Rayder said, "to come back to us wearing a black cloak."

"What else would a man of the Night's Watch wear?"

"Kill him," urged Harma. "Send his body back up in that cage o' theirs and tell them to send us someone else. I'll keep his head for my standard. A turncloak's worse than a dog."

"I warned you he was false." Varamyr's tone was mild, but his shadowcat was staring at Jon hungrily through slitted grey eyes. "I never did like the smell o' him."

"Pull in your claws, beastling." Tormund Giantsbane swung down off his horse. "The lad's here to hear. You lay a paw on him, might be I'll take me that shadowskin cloak I been wanting."

"Tormund Crowlover," Harma sneered. "You are a great sack o' wind, old man."

The skinchanger was grey-faced, round-shouldered, and bald, a mouse of a man with a wolfling's eyes. "Once a horse is broken to the saddle, any man can mount him," he said in a soft voice. "Once a beast's been joined to a man, any skinchanger can slip inside and ride him. Orell was withering inside his feathers, so I took the eagle for my own. But the joining works both ways, warg. Orell lives inside me now, whispering how much he hates you. And I can soar above the Wall, and see with eagle eyes."

"So we know," said Mance. "We know how few you were, when you stopped the turtle. We know how many came from Eastwatch. We know

how your supplies have dwindled. Pitch, oil, arrows, spears. Even your stair is gone, and that cage can only lift so many. We know. And now you know we know.” He opened the flap of the tent. “Come inside. The rest of you, wait here.”

“What, even me?” said Tormund.

“*Particularly* you. Always.”

It was warm within. A small fire burned beneath the smoke holes, and a brazier smouldered near the pile of furs where Dalla lay, pale and sweating. Her sister was holding her hand. *Val*, Jon remembered. “I was sorry when Jarl fell,” he told her.

Val looked at him with pale grey eyes. “He always climbed too fast.” She was as fair as he’d remembered, slender, full-breasted, graceful even at rest, with high sharp cheekbones and a thick braid of honey-colored hair that fell to her waist.

“Dalla’s time is near,” Mance explained. “She and Val will stay. They know what I mean to say.”

Jon kept his face as still as ice. *Foul enough to slay a man in his own tent under truce. Must I murder him in front of his wife as their child is being born?* He closed the fingers of his sword hand. Mance was not wearing armor, but his own sword was sheathed on his left hip. And there were other weapons in the tent, daggers and dirks, a bow and a quiver of arrows, a bronze-headed spear lying beside that big black . . .

. . . horn.

Jon sucked in his breath.

A warhorn, a bloody great warhorn.

“Yes,” Mance said. “The Horn of Winter, that Joramun once blew to wake giants from the earth.”

The horn was huge, eight feet along the curve and so wide at the mouth that he could have put his arm inside up to the elbow. *If this came from an aurochs, it was the biggest that ever lived.* At first he thought the bands around it were bronze, but when he moved closer he realized they were gold. *Old gold, more brown than yellow, and graven with runes.*

“Ygritte said you never found the horn.”

“Did you think only crows could lie? I liked you well enough, for a bastard . . . but I never trusted you. A man needs to earn my trust.”

Jon faced him. “If you’ve had the Horn of Joramun all along, why haven’t you used it? Why bother building turtles and sending Thenns to kill us in our beds? If this horn is all the songs say, why not just sound it and be done?”

It was Dalla who answered him, Dalla great with child, lying on her pile of furs beside the brazier. “We free folk know things you kneelers have forgotten. Sometimes the short road is not the safest, Jon Snow. The Horned Lord once said that sorcery is a sword without a hilt. There is no safe way to grasp it.”

Mance ran a hand along the curve of the great horn. “No man goes hunting with only one arrow in his quiver,” he said. “I had hoped that Styr and Jarl would take your brothers unawares, and open the gate for us. I drew your garrison away with feints and raids and secondary attacks. Bowen Marsh swallowed that lure as I knew he would, but your band of cripples and orphans proved to be more stubborn than anticipated. Don’t think you’ve stopped us, though. The truth is, you are too few and we are too many. I could continue the attack here and still send ten thousand men to cross the Bay of Seals on rafts and take Eastwatch from the rear. I could storm the Shadow Tower too, I know the approaches as well as any man alive. I could send men and mammoths to dig out the gates at the castles you’ve abandoned, all of them at once.”

“Why don’t you, then?” Jon could have drawn Longclaw then, but he wanted to hear what the wildling had to say.

“Blood,” said Mance Rayder. “I’d win in the end, yes, but you’d bleed me, and my people have bled enough.”

“Your losses haven’t been that heavy.”

“Not at your hands.” Mance studied Jon’s face. “You saw the Fist of the First Men. You know what happened there. You know what we are facing.”

“The Others . . .”

“They grow stronger as the days grow shorter and the nights colder. First they kill you, then they send your dead against you. The giants have not

been able to stand against them, nor the Thenns, the ice river clans, the Hornfoots.”

“Nor you?”

“Nor me.” There was anger in that admission, and bitterness too deep for words. “Raymun Redbeard, Bael the Bard, Gendel and Gorne, the Horned Lord, they all came south to conquer, but I’ve come with my tail between my legs to hide behind your Wall.” He touched the horn again. “If I sound the Horn of Winter, the Wall will fall. Or so the songs would have me believe. There are those among my people who want nothing more . . .”

“But once the Wall is fallen,” Dalla said, “*what will stop the Others?*”

Mance gave her a fond smile. “It’s a wise woman I’ve found. A true queen.” He turned back to Jon. “Go back and tell them to open their gate and let us pass. If they do, I will give them the horn, and the Wall will stand until the end of days.”

Open the gate and let them pass. Easy to say, but what must follow? Giants camping in the ruins of Winterfell? Cannibals in the wolfswood, chariots sweeping across the barrowlands, free folk stealing the daughters of shipwrights and silversmiths from White Harbor and fishwives off the Stony Shore? “Are you a true king?” Jon asked suddenly.

“I’ve never had a crown on my head or sat my arse on a bloody throne, if that’s what you’re asking,” Mance replied. “My birth is as low as a man’s can get, no septon’s ever smeared my head with oils, I don’t own any castles, and my queen wears furs and amber, not silk and sapphires. I am my own champion, my own fool, and my own harpist. You don’t become King-beyond-the-Wall because your father was. The free folk won’t follow a name, and they don’t care which brother was born first. They follow fighters. When I left the Shadow Tower there were five men making noises about how they might be the stuff of kings. Tormund was one, the Magnar another. The other three I slew, when they made it plain they’d sooner fight than follow.”

“You can kill your enemies,” Jon said bluntly, “but can you rule your friends? If we let your people pass, are you strong enough to make them keep the king’s peace and obey the laws?”

“Whose laws? The laws of Winterfell and King’s Landing?” Mance laughed. “When we want laws we’ll make our own. You can keep your king’s justice too, and your king’s taxes. I’m offering you the horn, not our freedom. We will not kneel to you.”

“What if we refuse the offer?” Jon had no doubt that they would. The Old Bear might at least have listened, though he would have balked at the notion of letting thirty or forty thousand wildlings loose on the Seven Kingdoms. But Alliser Thorne and Janos Slynt would dismiss the notion out of hand.

“If you refuse,” Mance Rayder said, “Tormund Giantsbane will sound the Horn of Winter three days hence, at dawn.”

He could carry the message back to Castle Black and tell them of the horn, but if he left Mance still alive Lord Janos and Ser Alliser would seize on that as proof that he was a turncloak. A thousand thoughts flickered through Jon’s head. *If I can destroy the horn, smash it here and now . . .* but before he could begin to think that through, he heard the low moan of some other horn, made faint by the tent’s hide walls. Mance heard it too. Frowning, he went to the door. Jon followed.

The warhorn was louder outside. Its call had stirred the wildling camp. Three Hornfoot men jogged past, carrying long spears. Horses were whinnying and snorting, giants roaring in the Old Tongue, and even the mammoths were restless.

“Outrider’s horn,” Tormund told Mance.

“Something’s coming.” Varamyr sat crosslegged on the half-frozen ground, his wolves circled restlessly around him. A shadow swept over him, and Jon looked up to see the eagle’s blue-grey wings. “Coming, from the east.”

When the dead walk, walls and stakes and swords mean nothing, he remembered. You cannot fight the dead, Jon Snow. No man knows that half so well as me.

Harma scowled. “East? The wights should be behind us.”

“East,” the skinchanger repeated. “*Something’s coming.*”

“The Others?” Jon asked.

Mance shook his head. "The Others never come when the sun is up." Chariots were rattling across the killing ground, jammed with riders waving spears of sharpened bone. The king groaned. "Where the bloody hell do they think they're going? Quenn, get those fools back where they belong. Someone bring my horse. The mare, not the stallion. I'll want my armor too." Mance glanced suspiciously at the Wall. Atop the icy parapets, the straw soldiers stood collecting arrows, but there was no sign of any other activity. "Harma, mount up your raiders. Tormund, find your sons and give me a triple line of spears."

"Aye," said Tormund, striding off.

The mousy little skinchanger closed his eyes and said, "I see them. They're coming along the streams and game trails . . ."

"Who?"

"Men. Men on horses. Men in steel and men in black."

"Crows." Mance made the word a curse. He turned on Jon. "Did my old brothers think they'd catch me with my breeches down if they attacked while we were talking?"

"If they planned an attack they never told me about it." Jon did not believe it. Lord Janos lacked the men to attack the wildling camp. Besides, he was on the wrong side of the Wall, and the gate was sealed with rubble. *He had a different sort of treachery in mind, this can't be his work.*

"If you're lying to me again, you won't be leaving here alive," Mance warned. His guards brought him his horse and armor. Elsewhere around the camp, Jon saw people running at cross purposes, some men forming up as if to storm the Wall while others slipped into the woods, women driving dog carts east, mammoths wandering west. He reached back over his shoulder and drew Longclaw just as a thin line of rangers emerged from the fringes of the wood three hundred yards away. They wore black mail, black halfhelms, and black cloaks. Half-armored, Mance drew his sword. "You knew nothing of this, did you?" he said to Jon, coldly.

Slow as honey on a cold morning, the rangers swept down on the wildling camp, picking their way through clumps of gorse and stands of trees, over roots and rocks. Wildlings flew to meet them, shouting war cries and waving clubs and bronze swords and axes made of flint, galloping

headlong at their ancient enemies. *A shout, a slash, and a fine brave death*, Jon had heard brothers say of the free folk's way of fighting.

"Believe what you will," Jon told the King-beyond-the-Wall, "but I knew nothing of any attack."

Harma thundered past before Mance could reply, riding at the head of thirty raiders. Her standard went before her; a dead dog impaled on a spear, raining blood at every stride. Mance watched as she smashed into the rangers. "Might be you're telling it true," he said. "Those look like Eastwatch men. Sailors on horses. Cotter Pyke always had more guts than sense. He took the Lord of Bones at Long Barrow, he might have thought to do the same with me. If so, he's a fool. He doesn't have the men, he—"

"*Mance!*" the shout came. It was a scout, bursting from the trees on a lathered horse. "*Mance*, there's more, they're all around us, iron men, *iron*, a *host* of iron men."

Cursing, Mance swung up into the saddle. "Varamyr, stay and see that no harm comes to Dalla." The King-beyond-the-Wall pointed his sword at Jon. "And keep a few extra eyes on this crow. If he runs, rip out his throat."

"Aye, I'll do that." The skinchanger was a head shorter than Jon, slumped and soft, but that shadowcat could disembowel him with one paw. "They're coming from the north too," Varamyr told Mance. "You best go."

Mance donned his helm with its raven wings. His men were mounted up as well. "Arrowhead," Mance snapped, "to me, form wedge." Yet when he slammed his heels into the mare and flew across the field at the rangers, the men who raced to catch him lost all semblance of formation.

Jon took a step toward the tent, thinking of the Horn of Winter, but the shadowcat blocked him, tail lashing. The beast's nostrils flared, and slaver ran from his curved front teeth. *He smells my fear*. He missed Ghost more than ever then. The two wolves were behind him, growling.

"Banners," he heard Varamyr murmur, "I see golden banners, oh . . ." A mammoth lumbered by, trumpeting, a half-dozen bowmen in the wooden tower on its back. "The king . . . no . . ."

Then the skinchanger threw back his head and *screamed*.

The sound was shocking, ear-piercing, thick with agony. Varamyr fell, writhing, and the 'cat was screaming too . . . and high, high in the eastern sky, against the wall of cloud, Jon saw the eagle *burning*. For a heartbeat it flamed brighter than a star, wreathed in red and gold and orange, its wings beating wildly at the air as if it could fly from the pain. Higher it flew, and higher, and higher still.

The scream brought Val out of the tent, white-faced. "What is it, what's happened?" Varamyr's wolves were fighting each other, and the shadowcat had raced off into the trees, but the man was still twisting on the ground. "What's wrong with him?" Val demanded, horrified. "Where's Mance?"

"There." Jon pointed. "Gone to fight." The king led his ragged wedge into a knot of rangers, his sword flashing.

"Gone? He can't be gone, not now. It's started."

"The battle?" He watched the rangers scatter before Harma's bloody dog's head. The raiders screamed and hacked and chased the men in black back into the trees. But there were more men coming from the wood, a column of horse. *Knights on heavy horse*, Jon saw. Harma had to regroup and wheel to meet them, but half of her men had raced too far ahead.

"The *birth!*" Val was shouting at him.

Trumpets were blowing all around, loud and brazen. *The wildlings have no trumpets, only warhorns*. They knew that as well as he did; the sound sent free folk running in confusion, some toward the fighting, others away. A mammoth was stomping through a flock of sheep that three men were trying to herd off west. The drums were beating as the wildlings ran to form squares and lines, but they were too late, too disorganized, too slow. The enemy was emerging from the forest, from the east, the northeast, the north; three great columns of heavy horse, all dark glinting steel and bright wool surcoats. Not the men of Eastwatch, those had been no more than a line of scouts. An army. *The king?* Jon was as confused as the wildlings. Could Robb have returned? Had the boy on the Iron Throne finally bestirred himself? "You best get back inside the tent," he told Val.

Across the field one column had washed over Harma Dogshead. Another smashed into the flank of Tormund's spearmen as he and his sons desperately tried to turn them. The giants were climbing onto their

mammoths, though, and the knights on their barded horses did not like that at all; he could see how the coursers and destriers screamed and scattered at the sight of those lumbering mountains. But there was fear on the wildling side as well, hundreds of women and children rushing away from the battle, some of them blundering right under the hooves of garrons. He saw an old woman's dog cart veer into the path of three chariots, to send them crashing into each other.

"Gods," Val whispered, "gods, why are they doing this?"

"Go inside the tent and stay with Dalla. It's not safe out here." It wouldn't be a great deal safer inside, but she didn't need to hear that.

"I need to find the midwife," Val said.

"You're the midwife. I'll stay here until Mance comes back." He had lost sight of Mance but now he found him again, cutting his way through a knot of mounted men. The mammoths had shattered the center column, but the other two were closing like pincers. On the eastern edge of the camps, some archers were loosing fire arrows at the tents. He saw a mammoth pluck a knight from his saddle and fling him forty feet with a flick of its trunk. Wildlings streamed past, women and children running from the battle, some with men hurrying them along. A few of them gave Jon dark looks but Longclaw was in his hand, and no one troubled him. Even Varamyr fled, crawling off on his hands and knees.

More and more men were pouring from the trees, not only knights now but freeriders and mounted bowmen and men-at-arms in jacks and kettle helmets, dozens of men, hundreds of men. A blaze of banners flew above them. The wind was whipping them too wildly for Jon to see the sigils, but he glimpsed a seahorse, a field of birds, a ring of flowers. And yellow, so much yellow, yellow banners with a red device, whose arms were those?

East and north and northeast, he saw bands of wildlings trying to stand and fight, but the attackers rode right over them. The free folk still had the numbers, but the attackers had steel armor and heavy horses. In the thickest part of the fray, Jon saw Mance standing tall in his stirrups. His red-and-black cloak and raven-winged helm made him easy to pick out. He had his sword raised and men were rallying to him when a wedge of knights smashed into them with lance and sword and longaxe. Mance's mare went

up on her hind legs, kicking, and a spear took her through the breast. Then the steel tide washed over him.

It's done, Jon thought, *they're breaking*. The wildlings were running, throwing down their weapons, Hornfoot men and cave dwellers and Thenns in bronze scales, they were running. Mance was gone, someone was waving Harma's head on a pole, Tormund's lines had broken. Only the giants on their mammoths were holding, hairy islands in a red steel sea. The fires were leaping from tent to tent and some of the tall pines were going up as well. And through the smoke another wedge of armored riders came, on barded horses. Floating above them were the largest banners yet, royal standards as big as sheets; a yellow one with long pointed tongues that showed a flaming heart, and another like a sheet of beaten gold, with a black stag prancing and rippling in the wind.

Robert, Jon thought for one mad moment, remembering poor Owen, but when the trumpets blew again and the knights charged, the name they cried was "*Stannis! Stannis! STANNIS!*"

Jon turned away, and went inside the tent.