

JON

The sun had broken through near midday, after seven days of dark skies and snow flurries. Some of the drifts were higher than a man, but the stewards had been shoveling all day and the paths were as clean as they were like to get. Reflections glimmered off the Wall, every crack and crevice glittering pale blue.

Seven hundred feet up, Jon Snow stood looking down upon the haunted forest. A north wind swirled through the trees below, sending thin white plumes of snow crystals flying from the highest branches, like icy banners. Elsewise nothing moved. *Not a sign of life.* That was not entirely reassuring. It was not the living that he feared. Even so ...

The sun is out. The snow has stopped. It may be a moon's turn before we have another chance as good. It may be a season. “Have Emmett assemble his recruits,” he told Dolorous Edd. “We’ll want an escort. Ten rangers, armed with dragonglass. I want them ready to leave within the hour.”

“Aye, m’lord. And to command?”

“That would be me.”

Edd’s mouth turned down even more than usual. “Some might think it better if the lord commander stayed safe and warm south of the Wall. Not that I’d say such myself, but some might.”

Jon smiled. “Some had best not say so in my presence.”

A sudden gust of wind set Edd’s cloak to flapping noisily. “Best go down, m’lord. This wind’s like to push us off the Wall, and I never did learn the knack of flying.”

They rode the winch lift back to the ground. The wind was gusting, cold as the breath of the ice dragon in the tales Old Nan had told when Jon was a boy. The heavy cage was swaying. From time to time it scraped against the

Wall, starting small crystalline showers of ice that sparkled in the sunlight as they fell, like shards of broken glass.

Glass, Jon mused, might be of use here. Castle Black needs its own glass gardens, like the ones at Winterfell. We could grow vegetables even in the deep of winter. The best glass came from Myr, but a good clear pane was worth its weight in spice, and green and yellow glass would not work as well. What we need is gold. With enough coin, we could buy 'prentice glass-blowers and glaziers in Myr, bring them north, offer them their freedom for teaching their art to some of our recruits. That would be the way to go about it. If we had the gold. Which we do not.

At the base of the Wall he found Ghost rolling in a snowbank. The big white direwolf seemed to love fresh snow. When he saw Jon he bounded back onto his feet and shook himself off. Dolorous Edd said, “He’s going with you?”

“He is.”

“A clever wolf, him. And me?”

“You’re not.”

“A clever lord, you. Ghost’s the better choice. I don’t have the teeth for biting wildlings anymore.”

“If the gods are good, we won’t encounter any wildlings. I’ll want the grey gelding.”

Word spread fast at Castle Black. Edd was still saddling the grey when Bowen Marsh stomped across the yard to confront Jon at the stables. “My lord, I wish you would reconsider. The new men can take their vows in the sept as easily.”

“The sept is home to the new gods. The old gods live in the wood, and those who honor them say their words amongst the weirwoods. You know that as well as I.”

“Satin comes from Oldtown, and Arron and Emrick from the wester-lands. The old gods are not their gods.”

“I do not tell men which god to worship. They were free to choose the Seven or the red woman’s Lord of Light. They chose the trees instead, with all the peril that entails.”

“The Weeping Man may still be out there, watching.”

“The grove is no more than two hours’ ride, even with the snow. We should be back by midnight.”

“Too long. This is not wise.”

“Unwise,” said Jon, “but necessary. These men are about to pledge their lives to the Night’s Watch, joining a brotherhood that stretches back in an unbroken line for thousands of years. The words matter, and so do these traditions. They bind us all together, highborn and low, young and old, base and noble. They make us brothers.” He clapped Marsh on his shoulder. “I promise you, we shall return.”

“Aye, my lord,” said the Lord Steward, “but will it be as living men or heads on spears with your eyes scooped out? You will be returning through the black of night. The snowdrifts are waist deep in places. I see that you are taking seasoned men with you, that is good, but Black Jack Bulwer knew these woods as well. Even Benjen Stark, your own uncle, he—”

“I have something they did not.” Jon turned his head and whistled. “*Ghost*. To me.” The direwolf shook the snow from his back and trotted to Jon’s side. The rangers parted to let him through, though one mare whinnied and shied away till Rory gave her reins a sharp tug. “The Wall is yours, Lord Bowen.” He took his horse by the bridle and walked him to the gate and the icy tunnel that snaked beneath the Wall.

Beyond the ice, the trees stood tall and silent, huddled in the thick white cloaks. Ghost stalked beside Jon’s horse as the rangers and recruits formed up, then stopped and sniffed, his breath frosting in the air. “What is it?” Jon

asked. “Is someone there?” The woods were empty as far as he could see, but that was not very far.

Ghost bounded toward the trees, slipped between two white-cloaked pines, and vanished in a cloud of snow. *He wants to hunt, but what?* Jon did not fear for the direwolf so much as for any wildlings he might encounter. *A white wolf in a white wood, silent as a shadow. They will never know he’s coming.* He knew better than to go chasing him. Ghost would return when he wanted to and not before. Jon put his heels into his horse. His men fell in around them, the hooves of their garrons breaking through the icy crust to the softer snow beneath. Into the woods they went, at a steady walking pace, as the Wall dwindled behind them.

The soldier pines and sentinels wore thick white coats, and icicles draped the bare brown limbs of the broadleaves. Jon sent Tom Barleycorn ahead to scout for them, though the way to the white grove was oft trod and familiar. Big Liddle and Luke of Longtown slipped into the brush to east and west. They would flank the column to give warning of any approach. All were seasoned rangers, armed with obsidian as well as steel, warhorns slung across their saddles should they need to summon help.

The others were good men too. *Good men in a fight, at least, and loyal to their brothers.* Jon could not speak for what they might have been before they reached the Wall, but he did not doubt that most had pasts as black as their cloaks. Up here, they were the sort of men he wanted at his back. Their hoods were raised against the biting wind, and some had scarves wrapped about their faces, hiding their features. Jon knew them, though. Every name was graven on his heart. They were his men, his brothers.

Six more rode with them—a mix of young and old, large and small, seasoned and raw. *Six to say the words.* Horse had been born and raised in Mole’s Town, Arron and Emrick came from Fair Isle, Satin from the brothels of Oldtown at the other end of Westeros. All of them were boys. Leathers and Jax were older men, well past forty, sons of the haunted forest, with sons and grandsons of their own. They had been two of the sixty-three wildlings who had followed Jon Snow back to the Wall the day he made his appeal, so far the only two to decide they wanted a black cloak. Iron Emmett said they all were ready, or as ready as they were ever going to be.

He and Jon and Bowen Marsh had weighed each man in turn and assigned him to an order: Leathers, Jax, and Emrick to the rangers, Horse to the builders, Arron and Satin to the stewards. The time had come for them to take their vows.

Iron Emmett rode at the head of the column, mounted on the ugliest horse Jon had ever seen, a shaggy beast that looked to be all hair and hooves. “Talk is there was some trouble at Harlot’s Tower last night,” the master-at-arms said.

“Hardin’s Tower.” Of the sixty-three who had come back with him from Mole’s Town, nineteen had been women and girls. Jon had housed them in the same abandoned tower where he had once slept when he had been new to the Wall. Twelve were spearwives, more than capable of defending both themselves and the younger girls from the unwanted attentions of black brothers. It was some of the men they’d turned away who’d given Hardin’s Tower its new, inflammatory name. Jon was not about to condone the mockery. “Three drunken fools mistook Hardin’s for a brothel, that’s all. They are in the ice cells now, contemplating their mistake.”

Iron Emmett grimaced. “Men are men, vows are words, and words are wind. You should put guards around the women.”

“And who will guard the guards?” *You know nothing, Jon Snow.* He had learned, though, and Ygritte had been his teacher. If he could not hold to his own vows, how could he expect more of his brothers? But there were dangers in trifling with wildling women. *A man can own a woman, and a man can own a knife,* Ygritte had told him once, *but no man can own both.* Bowen Marsh had not been all wrong. Hardin’s Tower was tinder waiting for a spark. “I mean to open three more castles,” Jon said. “Deep Lake, Sable Hall, and the Long Barrow. All garrisoned with free folk, under the command of our own officers. The Long Barrow will be all women, aside from the commander and chief steward.” There would be some mingling, he did not doubt, but the distances were great enough to make that difficult, at least.

“And what poor fool will get that choice command?”

“I am riding beside him.”

The look of mingled horror and delight that passed across Iron Emmett’s face was worth more than a sack of gold. “What have I done to make you hate me so, my lord?”

Jon laughed. “Have no fear, you won’t be alone. I mean to give you Dolorous Edd as your second and your steward.”

“The spearwives will be so happy. You might do well to bestow a castle on the Magnar.”

Jon’s smile died. “I might if I could trust him. Sigorn blames me for his father’s death, I fear. Worse, he was bred and trained to give orders, not to take them. Do not confuse the Thenns with free folk. *Magnar* means *lord* in the Old Tongue, I am told, but Styr was closer to a god to his people, and his son is cut from the same skin. I do not require men to kneel, but they do need to obey.”

“Aye, m’lord, but you had best do something with the Magnar. You’ll have trouble with the Thenns if you ignore them.”

Trouble is the lord commander’s lot, Jon might have said. His visit to Mole’s Town was giving him plenty, as it happened, and the women were the least of it. Halleck was proving to be just as truculent as he had feared, and there were some amongst the black brothers whose hatred of the free folk was bone deep. One of Halleck’s followers had already cut off a builder’s ear in the yard, and like as not that was just a taste of the bloodshed to come. He had to get the old forts open soon, so Harma’s brother could be sent off to garrison Deep Lake or Sable Hall. Just now, though, neither of those was fit for human habitation, and Othell Yarwyck and his builders were still off trying to restore the Nightfort. There were nights when Jon Snow wondered if he had not made a grievous mistake by preventing Stannis from marching all the wildlings off to be slaughtered. *I know nothing, Ygritte*, he thought, *and perhaps I never will*.

Half a mile from the grove, long red shafts of autumn sunlight were slanting down between the branches of the leafless trees, staining the snowdrifts

pink. The riders crossed a frozen stream, between two jagged rocks armored in ice, then followed a twisting game trail to the northeast. Whenever the wind kicked up, sprays of loose snow filled the air and stung their eyes. Jon pulled his scarf up over his mouth and nose and raised the hood on his cloak. "Not far now," he told the men. No one replied.

Jon smelled Tom Barleycorn before he saw him. Or was it Ghost who smelled him? Of late, Jon Snow sometimes felt as if he and the direwolf were one, even awake. The great white wolf appeared first, shaking off the snow. A few moments later Tom was there. "Wildlings," he told Jon, softly. "In the grove."

Jon brought the riders to a halt. "How many?"

"I counted nine. No guards. Some dead, might be, or sleeping. Most look to be women. One child, but there's a giant too. Just the one that I saw. They got a fire burning, smoke drifting through the trees. Fools."

Nine, and I have seven-and-ten. Four of his were green boys, though, and none were giants.

Jon was not of a mind to fall back to the Wall, however. *If the wildlings are still alive, it may be we can bring them in. And if they are dead, well ... a corpse or two could be of use.* "We'll continue on foot," he said, dropping lightly to the frozen ground. The snow was ankle deep. "Rory, Pate, stay with the horses." He might have given that duty to the recruits, but they would need to be blooded soon enough. This was as good a time as any. "Spread out and form a crescent. I want to close in on the grove from three sides. Keep the men to your right and left in sight, so the gaps do not widen. The snow should muffle our steps. Less chance of blood if we take them unawares."

Night was falling fast. The shafts of sunlight had vanished when the last thin slice of the sun was swallowed beneath the western woods. The pink snow drifts were going white again, the color leaching out of them as the world darkened. The evening sky had turned the faded grey of an old cloak that had been washed too many times, and the first shy stars were coming out.

Ahead he glimpsed a pale white trunk that could only be a weirwood, crowned with a head of dark red leaves. Jon Snow reached back and pulled Longclaw from his sheath. He looked to right and left, gave Satin and Horse a nod, watched them pass it on to the men beyond. They rushed the grove together, kicking through drifts of old snow with no sound but their breathing. Ghost ran with them, a white shadow at Jon's side.

The weirwoods rose in a circle around the edges of the clearing. There were nine, all roughly of the same age and size. Each one had a face carved into it, and no two faces were alike. Some were smiling, some were screaming, some were shouting at him. In the deepening glow their eyes looked black, but in daylight they would be blood-red, Jon knew. *Eyes like Ghost's.*

The fire in the center of the grove was a small sad thing, ashes and embers and a few broken branches burning slow and smoky. Even then, it had more life than the wildlings huddled near it. Only one of them reacted when Jon stepped from the brush. That was the child, who began to wail, clutching at his mother's ragged cloak. The woman raised her eyes and gasped. By then the grove was ringed by rangers, sliding past the bone-white trees, steel glinting in black-gloved hands, poised for slaughter.

The giant was the last to notice them. He had been asleep, curled up by the fire, but something woke him—the child's cry, the sound of snow crunching beneath black boots, a sudden indrawn breath. When he stirred it was as if a boulder had come to life. He heaved himself into a sitting position with a snort, pawing at his eyes with hands as big as hams to rub the sleep away ... until he saw Iron Emmett, his sword shining in his hand. Roaring, he came leaping to his feet, and one of those huge hands closed around a maul and jerked it up.

Ghost showed his teeth in answer. Jon grabbed the wolf by the scruff of the neck. "We want no battle here." His men could bring the giant down, he knew, but not without cost. Once blood was shed, the wildlings would join the fray. Most or all would die here, and some of his own brothers too. "This is a holy place. Yield, and we—"

The giant bellowed again, a sound that shook the leaves in the trees, and slammed his maul against the ground. The shaft of it was six feet of gnarled

oak, the head a stone as big as a loaf of bread. The impact made the ground shake. Some of the other wildlings went scrambling for their own weapons.

Jon Snow was about to reach for Longclaw when Leathers spoke, from the far side of the grove. His words sounded gruff and guttural, but Jon heard the music in it and recognized the Old Tongue. Leathers spoke for a long while. When he was done, the giant answered. It sounded like growling, interspersed with grunts, and Jon could not understand a word of it. But Leathers pointed at the trees and said something else, and the giant pointed at the trees, ground his teeth, and dropped his maul.

“It’s done,” said Leathers. “They want no fight.”

“Well done. What did you tell him?”

“That they were our gods too. That we came to pray.”

“We shall. Put away your steel, all of you. We will have no blood shed here tonight.”

Nine, Tom Barleycorn had said, and nine there were, but two were dead and one so weak he might have died by morning. The six who remained included a mother and child, two old men, a wounded Thenn in battered bronze, and one of the Hornfoot folk, his bare feet so badly frostbitten that Jon knew at a glance he would never walk again. Most had been strangers to one another when they came to the grove, he learned subsequently; when Stannis broke Mance Rayder’s host, they had fled into the woods to escape the carnage, wandered for a time, lost friends and kin to cold and starvation, and finally washed up here, too weak and weary to go on. “The gods are here,” one of the old men said. “This was as good a place to die as any.”

“The Wall is only a few hours south of here,” said Jon. “Why not seek shelter there? Others yielded. Even Mance.”

The wildlings exchanged looks. Finally one said, “We heard stories. The crows burned all them that yielded.”

“Even Mance hisself,” the woman added.

Melisandre, Jon thought, *you and your red god have much and more to answer for.* “All those who wish are welcome to return with us. There is food and shelter at Castle Black, and the Wall to keep you safe from the things that haunt these woods. You have my word, no one will burn.”

“A crow’s word,” the woman said, hugging her child close, “but who’s to say that you can keep it? Who are you?”

“Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, and a son of Eddard Stark of Winterfell.” Jon turned to Tom Barleycorn. “Have Rory and Pate bring up the horses. I do not mean to stay here one moment longer than we must.”

“As you say, m’lord.”

One last thing remained before they could depart: the thing that they had come for. Iron Emmett called forth his charges, and as the rest of the company watched from a respectful distance, they knelt before the weirwoods. The last light of day was gone by then; the only light came from the stars above and the faint red glow of the dying fire in the center of the grove.

With their black hoods and thick black cowls, the six might have been carved from shadow. Their voices rose together, small against the vastness of the night. “Night gathers, and now my watch begins,” they said, as thousands had said before them. Satin’s voice was sweet as song, Horse’s hoarse and halting, Arron’s a nervous squeak. “It shall not end until my death.”

May those deaths be long in coming. Jon Snow sank to one knee in the snow. *Gods of my fathers, protect these men. And Arya too, my little sister, wherever she might be. I pray you, let Mance find her and bring her safe to me.*

“I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children,” the recruits promised, in voices that echoed back through years and centuries. “I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post.”

Gods of the wood, grant me the strength to do the same, Jon Snow prayed silently. *Give me the wisdom to know what must be done and the courage to do it.*

“I am the sword in the darkness,” said the six, and it seemed to Jon as though their voices were changing, growing stronger, more certain. “I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men.”

The shield that guards the realms of men. Ghost nuzzled up against his shoulder, and Jon draped an arm around him. He could smell Horse’s unwashed breeches, the sweet scent Satin combed into his beard, the rank sharp smell of fear, the giant’s overpowering musk. He could hear the beating of his own heart. When he looked across the grove at the woman with her child, the two greybeards, the Hornfoot man with his maimed feet, all he saw was men.

“I pledge my life and honor to the Night’s Watch, for this night and all the nights to come.”

Jon Snow was the first onto his feet. “Rise now as men of the Night’s Watch.” He gave Horse a hand to pull him up.

The wind was rising. It was time to go.

The journey back took much longer than the journey to the grove. The giant’s pace was a ponderous one, despite the length and girth of those legs, and he was forever stopping to knock snow off low-hanging limbs with his maul. The woman rode double with Rory, her son with Tom Barleycorn, the old men with Horse and Satin. The Thenn was frightened of the horses, however, and preferred to limp along despite his wounds. The Hornfoot man could not sit a saddle and had to be tied over the back of a garron like a sack of grain; so too the pale-faced crone with the stick-thin limbs, whom they had not been able to rouse.

They did the same with the two corpses, to the puzzlement of Iron Emmett. “They will only slow us, my lord,” he said to Jon. “We should chop them up

and burn them.”

“No,” said Jon. “Bring them. I have a use for them.”

They had no moon to guide them home, and only now and then a patch of stars. The world was black and white and still. It was a long, slow, endless trek. The snow clung to their boots and breeches, and the wind rattled the pines and made their cloaks snap and swirl. Jon glimpsed the red wanderer above, watching them through the leafless branches of great trees as they made their way beneath. *The Thief*, the free folk called it. The best time to steal a woman was when the Thief was in the Moonmaid, Ygritte had always claimed. She never mentioned the best time to steal a giant. *Or two dead men.*

It was almost dawn before they saw the Wall again.

A sentry’s horn greeted them as they approached, sounding from on high like the cry of some huge, deep-throated bird, a single long blast that meant *rangers returning*. Big Liddle unslung his own warhorn and gave answer. At the gate, they had to wait a few moments before Dolorous Edd Tollett appeared to slide back the bolts and swing open the iron bars. When Edd caught sight of the ragged band of wildlings, he pursed his lips and gave the giant a long look. “Might need some butter to slide that one through the tunnel, m’lord. Shall I send someone to the larder?”

“Oh, I think he’ll fit. Unbuttered.”

So he did ... on hands and knees, crawling. *A big boy, this one. Fourteen feet, at least. Even bigger than Mag the Mighty.* Mag had died beneath this very ice, locked in mortal struggle with Donal Noye. *A good man. The Watch has lost too many good men.* Jon took Leathers aside. “Take charge of him. You speak his tongue. See that he is fed and find him a warm place by the fire. Stay with him. See that no one provokes him.”

“Aye.” Leathers hesitated. “M’lord.”

The living wildlings Jon sent off to have their wounds and frostbites tended. Some hot food and warm clothes would restore most of them, he hoped,

though the Hornfoot man was like to lose both feet. The corpses he consigned to the ice cells.

Clydas had come and gone, Jon noted as he was hanging his cloak on the peg beside the door. A letter had been left on the table in his solar. *Eastwatch or the Shadow Tower*, he assumed at first glance. But the wax was gold, not black. The seal showed a stag's head within a flaming heart. *Stannis*. Jon cracked the hardened wax, flattened the roll of parchment, read. *A maester's hand, but the king's words*.

Stannis had taken Deepwood Motte, and the mountain clans had joined him. Flint, Norrey, Wull, Liddle, all.

The captains, knights, notable warriors, and others of high birth we shall ransom or make other use of, the rest I mean to hang ..._]

The Night's Watch was sworn to take no side in the quarrels and conflicts of the realm. Nonetheless, Jon Snow could not help but feel a certain satisfaction. He read on.

You and your brothers must hold the Wall until I can return._

It was signed, in a different hand,

Done in the Light of Lord, under the sign and seal of Stannis of House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm.

The moment Jon set the letter aside, the parchment curled up again, as if eager to protect its secrets. He was not at all sure how he felt about what he had just read. Battles had been fought at Winterfell before, but never one without a Stark on one side or the other. "The castle is a shell," he said, "not Winterfell, but the ghost of Winterfell." It was painful just to think of it, much less say the words aloud. And still ...

He wondered how many men old Crowfood would bring to the fray, and how many swords Arnolf Karstark would be able to conjure up. Half the Umbers would be across the field with Whoresbane, fighting beneath the

flayed man of the Dreadfort, and the greater part of the strength of both houses had gone south with Robb, never to return. Even ruined, Winterfell itself would confer a considerable advantage on whoever held it. Robert Baratheon would have seen that at once and moved swiftly to secure the castle, with the forced marches and midnight rides for which he had been famous. Would his brother be as bold?

Not likely. Stannis was a deliberate commander, and his host was a half-digested stew of clansmen, southron knights, king's men and queen's men, salted with a few northern lords. *He should move on Winterfell swiftly, or not at all,* Jon thought. It was not his place to advise the king, but ...

He glanced at the letter again. *I will save your sister if I can.* A surprisingly tender sentiment from Stannis, though undercut by that final, brutal *if I can* and the addendum *and find a better match for her than Ramsay Snow.* But what if Arya was not there to be saved? What if Lady Melisandre's flames had told it true? Could his sister truly have escaped such captors? *How would she do that? Arya was always quick and clever, but in the end she's just a little girl, and Roose Bolton is not the sort who would be careless with a prize of such great worth.*

What if Bolton never had his sister? This wedding could well be just some ruse to lure Stannis into a trap. Eddard Stark had never had any reason to complain of the Lord of the Dreadfort, so far as Jon knew, but even so he had never trusted him, with his whispery voice and his pale, pale eyes.

A grey girl on a dying horse, fleeing from her marriage. On the strength of those words he had loosed Mance Rayder and six spearwives on the north. "Young ones, and pretty," Mance had said. The unburnt king supplied some names, and Dolorous Edd had done the rest, smuggling them from Mole's Town. It seemed like madness now. He might have done better to strike down Mance the moment he revealed himself. Jon had a certain grudging admiration for the late King-Beyond-the-Wall, but the man was an oathbreaker and a turncloak. He had even less trust in Melisandre. Yet somehow here he was, pinning his hopes on them. *All to save my sister. But the men of the Night's Watch have no sisters.*

When Jon had been a boy at Winterfell, his hero had been the Young Dragon, the boy king who had conquered Dorne at the age of fourteen. Despite his bastard birth, or perhaps because of it, Jon Snow had dreamed of leading men to glory just as King Daeron had, of growing up to be a conqueror. Now he was a man grown and the Wall was his, yet all he had were doubts. He could not even seem to conquer those.