

JON

“R’hllor,” sang Melisandre, her arms upraised against the falling snow, “you are the light in our eyes, the fire in our hearts, the heat in our loins. Yours is the sun that warms our days, yours the stars that guard us in the dark of night.”

“*All praise R’hllor, the Lord of Light,*” the wedding guests answered in ragged chorus before a gust of ice-cold wind blew their words away. Jon Snow raised the hood of his cloak.

The snowfall was light today, a thin scattering of flakes dancing in the air, but the wind was blowing from the east along the Wall, cold as the breath of the ice dragon in the tales Old Nan used to tell. Even Melisandre’s fire was shivering; the flames huddled down in the ditch, crackling softly as the red priestess sang. Only Ghost seemed not to feel the chill.

Alys Karstark leaned close to Jon. “Snow during a wedding means a cold marriage. My lady mother always said so.”

He glanced at Queen Selyse. *There must have been a blizzard the day she and Stannis wed.* Huddled beneath her ermine mantle and surrounded by her ladies, serving girls, and knights, the southron queen seemed a frail, pale, shrunken thing. A strained smile was frozen into place on her thin lips, but her eyes brimmed with reverence. *She hates the cold but loves the flames.* He had only to look at her to see that. *A word from Melisandre, and she would walk into the fire willingly, embrace it like a lover.*

Not all her queen’s men seemed to share her fervor. Ser Brus appeared half-drunk, Ser Malegorn’s gloved hand was cupped round the arse of the lady beside him, Ser Narbert was yawning, and Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain looked angry. Jon Snow had begun to understand why Stannis had left them with his queen.

“The night is dark and filled with terrors,” Melisandre sang. “Alone we are born and alone we die, but as we walk through this black vale we draw

strength from one another, and from you, our lord.” Her scarlet silks and satins swirled with every gust of wind. “Two come forth today to join their lives, so they may face this world’s darkness together. Fill their hearts with fire, my lord, so they may walk your shining path hand in hand forever.”

“*Lord of Light, protect us,*” cried Queen Selyse. Other voices echoed the response. Melisandre’s faithful: pallid ladies, shivering serving girls, Ser Axell and Ser Narbert and Ser Lambert, men-at-arms in iron mail and Thenns in bronze, even a few of Jon’s black brothers. “*Lord of Light, bless your children.*”

Melisandre’s back was to the Wall, on one side of the deep ditch where her fire burned. The couple to be joined faced her across the ditch. Behind them stood the queen, with her daughter and her tattooed fool. Princess Shireen was wrapped in so many furs that she looked round, breathing in white puffs through the scarf that covered most of her face. Ser Axell Florent and his queen’s men surrounded the royal party.

Though only a few men of the Night’s Watch had gathered about the ditchfire, more looked down from rooftops and windows and the steps of the great switchback stair. Jon took careful note of who was there and who was not. Some men had the duty; many just off watch were fast asleep. But others had chosen to absent themselves to show their disapproval. Othell Yarwyck and Bowen Marsh were amongst the missing. Septon Chayle had emerged briefly from the sept, fingering the seven-sided crystal on the thong about his neck, only to retreat inside again once the prayers began.

Melisandre raised her hands, and the ditchfire leapt upward toward her fingers, like a great red dog springing for a treat. A swirl of sparks rose to meet the snowflakes coming down. “Oh, Lord of Light, we thank you,” she sang to the hungry flames. “We thank you for brave Stannis, by your grace our king. Guide him and defend him, R’hllor. Protect him from the treacheries of evil men and grant him strength to smite the servants of the dark.”

“*Grant him strength,*” answered Queen Selyse and her knights and ladies. “*Grant him courage. Grant him wisdom.*”

Alys Karstark slipped her arm through Jon's. "How much longer, Lord Snow? If I'm to be buried beneath this snow, I'd like to die a woman wed."

"Soon, my lady," Jon assured her. "Soon."

"We thank you for the sun that warms us," chanted the queen. "We thank you for the stars that watch over us in the black of night. We thank you for our hearths and for our torches that keep the savage dark at bay. We thank you for our bright spirits, the fires in our loins and in our hearts."

And Melisandre said, "Let them come forth, who would be joined." The flames cast her shadow on the Wall behind her, and her ruby gleamed against the paleness of her throat.

Jon turned to Alys Karstark. "My lady. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"You're not scared?"

The girl smiled in a way that reminded Jon so much of his little sister that it almost broke his heart. "Let him be scared of me." The snowflakes were melting on her cheeks, but her hair was wrapped in a swirl of lace that Satin had found somewhere, and the snow had begun to collect there, giving her a frosty crown. Her cheeks were flushed and red, and her eyes sparkled.

"Winter's lady." Jon squeezed her hand.

The Magmar of Thenn stood waiting by the fire, clad as if for battle, in fur and leather and bronze scales, a bronze sword at his hip. His receding hair made him look older than his years, but as he turned to watch his bride approach, Jon could see the boy in him. His eyes were big as walnuts, though whether it was the fire, the priestess, or the woman that had put the fear in him Jon could not say. *Alys was more right than she knew.*

"Who brings this woman to be wed?" asked Melisandre. "I do," said Jon. "Now comes Alys of House Karstark, a woman grown and flowered, of

noble blood and birth.” He gave her hand one last squeeze and stepped back to join the others.

“Who comes forth to claim this woman?” asked Melisandre. “Me.” Sigorn slapped his chest. “Magnar of Thenn.”

“Sigorn,” asked Melisandre, “will you share your fire with Alys, and warm her when the night is dark and full of terrors?”

“I swear me.” The Magnar’s promise was a white cloud in the air. Snow dappled his shoulders. His ears were red. “By the red god’s flames, I warm her all her days.”

“Alys, do you swear to share your fire with Sigorn, and warm him when the night is dark and full of terrors?”

“Till his blood is boiling.” Her maiden’s cloak was the black wool of the Night’s Watch. The Karstark sunburst sewn on its back was made of the same white fur that lined it.

Melisandre’s eyes shone as bright as the ruby at her throat. “Then come to me and be as one.” As she beckoned, a wall of flames roared upward, licking at the snowflakes with hot orange tongues. Alys Karstark took her Magnar by the hand.

Side by side they leapt the ditch. “Two went into the flames.” A gust of wind lifted the red woman’s scarlet skirts till she pressed them down again. “One emerges.” Her coppery hair danced about her head. “What fire joins, none may put asunder.”

“*What fire joins, none may put asunder,*” came the echo, from queen’s men and Thenns and even a few of the black brothers.

Except for kings and uncles, thought Jon Snow.

Cregan Karstark had turned up a day behind his niece. With him came four mounted men-at-arms, a huntsman, and a pack of dogs, sniffing after Lady Alys as if she were a deer. Jon Snow met them on the kingsroad half a

league south of Mole's Town, before they could turn up at Castle Black, claim guest right, or call for parley. One of Karstark's men had loosed a crossbow quarrel at Ty and died for it. That left four, and Cregan himself.

Fortunately they had a dozen ice cells. *Room for all.*

Like so much else, heraldry ended at the Wall. The Thenns had no family arms as was customary amongst the nobles of the Seven Kingdoms, so Jon told the stewards to improvise. He thought they had done well. The bride's cloak Sigorn fastened about Lady Alys's shoulders showed a bronze disk on a field of white wool, surrounded by flames made with wisps of crimson silk. The echo of the Karstark sunburst was there for those who cared to look, but differenced to make the arms appropriate for House Thenn.

The Magnar all but ripped the maiden's cloak from Alys's shoulders, but when he fastened her bride's cloak about her he was almost tender. As he leaned down to kiss her cheek, their breath mingled. The flames roared once again. The queen's men began to sing a song of praise. "Is it done?" Jon heard Satin whisper.

"Done and done," muttered Mully, "and a good thing. They're wed and I'm half-froze." He was muffled up in his best blacks, woolens so new that they had hardly had a chance to fade yet, but the wind had turned his cheeks as red as his hair. "Hobb's mulled some wine with cinnamon and cloves. That'll warm us some."

"What's cloves?" asked Owen the Oaf.

The snow had started to descend more heavily and the fire in the ditch was guttering out. The crowd began to break apart and stream from the yard, queen's men, king's men, and free folk alike, all anxious to get out of the wind and the cold. "Will my lord be feasting with us?" Mully asked Jon Snow.

"Shortly." Sigorn might take it as a slight if he did not appear. *And this marriage is mine own work, after all.* "I have other matters to attend to first, however."

Jon crossed to Queen Selyse, with Ghost beside him. His boots crunched through piles of old snow. It was growing ever more time-consuming to shovel out the paths from one building to another; more and more, the men were resorting to the underground passages they called wormways.

“... such a beautiful rite,” the queen was saying. “I could feel our lord’s fiery gaze upon us. Oh, you cannot know how many times I have begged Stannis to let us be wed again, a true joining of body and spirit blessed by the Lord of Light. I know that I could give His Grace more children if we were bound in fire.”

To give him more children you would first need to get him into your bed. Even at the Wall, it was common knowledge that Stannis Baratheon had shunned his wife for years. One could only imagine how His Grace had responded to the notion of a second wedding in the midst of his war.

Jon bowed. “If it please Your Grace, the feast awaits.”

The queen glanced at Ghost suspiciously, then raised her head to Jon. “To be sure. Lady Melisandre knows the way.”

The red priestess spoke up. “I must attend my fires, Your Grace. Perhaps R’hllor will vouchsafe me a glimpse of His Grace. A glimpse of some great victory, mayhaps.”

“Oh.” Queen Selyse looked stricken. “To be sure ... let us pray for a vision from our lord ...”

“Satin, show Her Grace to her place,” said Jon.

Ser Malegorn stepped forward. “I will escort Her Grace to the feast. We shall not require your ... steward.” The way the man drew out the last word told Jon that he had been considering saying something else. *Boy? Pet? Whore?*

Jon bowed again. “As you wish. I shall join you shortly.”

Ser Malegorn offered his arm, and Queen Selyse took it stiffly. Her other hand settled on her daughter's shoulder. The royal ducklings fell in behind them as they made their way across the yard, marching to the music of the bells on the fool's hat. "Under the sea the mermen feast on starfish soup, and all the serving men are crabs," Patchface proclaimed as they went. "I know, I know, oh, oh, oh."

Melisandre's face darkened. "That creature is dangerous. Many a time I have glimpsed him in my flames. Sometimes there are skulls about him, and his lips are red with blood."

A wonder you haven't had the poor man burned. All it would take was a word in the queen's ear, and Patchface would feed her fires. "You see fools in your fire, but no hint of Stannis?"

"When I search for him all I see is snow."

The same useless answer. Clydas had dispatched a raven to Deepwood Motte to warn the king of Arnolf Karstark's treachery, but whether the bird had reached His Grace in time Jon did not know. The Braavosi banker was off in search of Stannis as well, accompanied by the guides that Jon had given him, but between the war and weather, it would be a wonder if he found him. "Would you know if the king was dead?" Jon asked the red priestess.

"He is not dead. Stannis is the Lord's chosen, destined to lead the fight against the dark. I have seen it in the flames, read of it in ancient prophecy. When the red star bleeds and the darkness gathers, Azor Ahai shall be born again amidst smoke and salt to wake dragons out of stone. Dragon-stone is the place of smoke and salt."

Jon had heard all this before. "Stannis Baratheon was the Lord of Dragonstone, but he was not born there. He was born at Storm's End, like his brothers." He frowned. "And what of Mance? Is he lost as well? What do your fires show?"

"The same, I fear. Only snow."

Snow. It was snowing heavily to the south, Jon knew. Only two days' ride from here, the kingsroad was said to be impassable. *Melisandre knows that too.* And to the east, a savage storm was raging on the Bay of Seals. At last report, the ragtag fleet they had assembled to rescue the free folk from Hardhome still huddled at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, confined to port by the rough seas. "You are seeing cinders dancing in the updraft."

"I am seeing skulls. And you. I see your face every time I look into the flames. The danger that I warned you of grows very close now."

"Daggers in the dark. I know. You will forgive my doubts, my lady. *A grey girl on a dying horse, fleeing from a marriage,* that was what you said."

"I was not wrong."

"You were not right. Alys is not Arya."

"The vision was a true one. It was my reading that was false. I am as mortal as you, Jon Snow. All mortals err."

"Even lord commanders." Mance Rayder and his spearwives had not returned, and Jon could not help but wonder whether the red woman had lied of a purpose. *Is she playing her own game?*

"You would do well to keep your wolf beside you, my lord."

"Ghost is seldom far." The direwolf raised his head at the sound of his name. Jon scratched him behind the ears. "But now you must excuse me. Ghost, with me."

Carved from the base of the Wall and closed with heavy wooden doors, the ice cells ranged from small to smaller. Some were big enough to allow a man to pace, others so small that prisoners were forced to sit; the smallest were too cramped to allow even that.

Jon had given his chief captive the largest cell, a pail to shit in, enough furs to keep him from freezing, and a skin of wine. It took the guards some time to open his cell, as ice had formed inside the lock. Rusted hinges screamed

like damned souls when Wick Whittlestick yanked the door wide enough for Jon to slip through. A faint fecal odor greeted him, though less overpowering than he'd expected. Even shit froze solid in such bitter cold. Jon Snow could see his own reflection dimly inside the icy walls.

In one corner of the cell a heap of furs was piled up almost to the height of a man. "Karstark," said Jon Snow. "Wake up."

The furs stirred. Some had frozen together, and the frost that covered them glittered when they moved. An arm emerged, then a face—brown hair, tangled and matted and streaked with grey, two fierce eyes, a nose, a mouth, a beard. Ice caked the prisoner's mustache, clumps of frozen snot. "Snow." His breath steamed in the air, fogging the ice behind his head. "You have no right to hold me. The laws of hospitality—"

"You are no guest of mine. You came to the Wall without my leave, armed, to carry off your niece against her will. Lady Alys was given bread and salt. She is a guest. You are a prisoner." Jon let that hang for a moment, then said, "Your niece is wed."

Cregan Karstark's lips skinned back from his teeth. "Alys was promised to me." Though past fifty, he had been a strong man when he went into the cell. The cold had robbed him of that strength and left him stiff and weak. "My lord father—"

"Your father is a castellan, not a lord. And a castellan has no right to make marriage pacts."

"My father, Arnolf, is Lord of Karhold."

"A son comes before an uncle by all the laws I know."

Cregan pushed himself to his feet and kicked aside the furs clinging to his ankles. "Harrion is dead."

Or will be soon. "A daughter comes before an uncle too. If her brother is dead, Karhold belongs to Lady Alys. And she has given her hand in marriage to Sigorn, Magnar of Thenn."

“A wildling. A filthy, murdering wildling.” Cregan’s hands closed into fists. The gloves that covered them were leather, lined with fur to match the cloak that hung matted and stiff from his broad shoulders. His black wool surcoat was emblazoned with the white sunburst of his house. “I see what you are, Snow. Half a wolf and half a wildling, baseborn get of a traitor and a whore. You would deliver a highborn maid to the bed of some stinking savage. Did you sample her yourself first?” He laughed. “If you mean to kill me, do it and be damned for a kinslayer. Stark and Karstark are one blood.”

“My name is Snow.” “*Bastard.*” “Guilty. Of that, at least.”

“Let this Magnar come to Karhold. We’ll hack off his head and stuff it in a privy, so we can piss into his mouth.”

“Sigorn leads two hundred Thenns,” Jon pointed out, “and Lady Alys believes Karhold will open its gates to her. Two of your men have already sworn her their service and confirmed all she had to say concerning the plans your father made with Ramsay Snow. You have close kin at Karhold, I am told. A word from you could save their lives. Yield the castle. Lady Alys will pardon the women who betrayed her and allow the men to take the black.”

Cregan shook his head. Chunks of ice had formed about the tangles in his hair, and *clicked* together softly when he moved. “Never,” he said. “Never, never, never.”

I should make his head a wedding gift for Lady Alys and her Magnar, Jon thought, but dare not take the risk. The Night’s Watch took no part in the quarrels of the realm; some would say he had already given Stannis too much help. Behead this fool, and they will claim I am killing northmen to give their lands to wildlings. Release him, and he will do his best to rip apart all I’ve done with Lady Alys and the Magnar. Jon wondered what his father would do, how his uncle might deal with this. But Eddard Stark was dead, Benjen Stark lost in the frozen wilds beyond the Wall. *You know nothing, Jon Snow.*

“Never is a long time,” Jon said. “You may feel differently on the morrow, or a year from now. Soon or late King Stannis will return to the Wall,

however. When he does he will have you put to death ... unless it happens that you are wearing a black cloak. When a man takes the black, his crimes are wiped away.” *Even such a man as you.* “Now pray excuse me. I have a feast to attend.”

After the biting cold of the ice cells, the crowded cellar was so hot that Jon felt suffocated from the moment he came down the steps. The air smelled of smoke and roasting meat and mulled wine. Axell Florent was making a toast as Jon took his place upon the dais. “To King Stannis and his wife, Queen Selyse, Light of the North!” Ser Axell bellowed. “To R’hllor, the Lord of Light, may he defend us all! One land, one god, one king!”

“*One land, one god, one king!*” the queen’s men echoed.

Jon drank with the rest. Whether Alys Karstark would find any joy in her marriage he could not say, but this one night at least should be one of celebration.

The stewards began to bring out the first dish, an onion broth flavored with bits of goat and carrot. Not precisely royal fare, but nourishing; it tasted good enough and warmed the belly. Owen the Oaf took up his fiddle, and several of the free folk joined in with pipes and drums. *The same pipes and drums they played to sound Mance Rayder’s attack upon the Wall.* Jon thought they sounded sweeter now. With the broth came loaves of coarse brown bread, warm from the oven. Salt and butter sat upon the tables. The sight made Jon gloomy. They were well provided with salt, Bowen Marsh had told him, but the last of the butter would be gone within a moon’s turn.

Old Flint and The Norrey had been given places of high honor just below the dais. Both men had been too old to march with Stannis; they had sent their sons and grandsons in their stead. But they had been quick enough to descend on Castle Black for the wedding. Each had brought a wet nurse to the Wall as well. The Norrey woman was forty, with the biggest breasts Jon Snow had ever seen. The Flint girl was fourteen and flat-chested as a boy, though she did not lack for milk. Between the two of them, the child Val called Monster seemed to be thriving.

For that much Jon was grateful ... but he did not believe for a moment that two such hoary old warriors would have hied down from their hills for that alone. Each had brought a tail of fighting men—five for Old Flint, twelve for The Norrey, all clad in ragged skins and studded leathers, fearsome as the face of winter. Some had long beards, some had scars, some had both; all worshiped the old gods of the north, those same gods worshiped by the free folk beyond the Wall. Yet here they sat, drinking to a marriage hallowed by some queer red god from beyond the seas.

Better that than refuse to drink. Neither Flint nor Norrey had turned their cups over to spill their wine upon the floor. That might betoken a certain acceptance. *Or perhaps they just hate to waste good southron wine. They will not have tasted much of it up in those stony hills of theirs.*

Between courses, Ser Axell Florent led Queen Selyse out onto the floor to dance. Others followed—the queen’s knights first, partnered with her ladies. Ser Brus gave Princess Shireen her first dance, then took a turn with her mother. Ser Narbert danced with each of Selyse’s lady companions in turn.

The queen’s men outnumbered the queen’s ladies three to one, so even the humblest serving girls were pressed into the dance. After a few songs some black brothers remembered skills learned at the courts and castles of their youth, before their sins had sent them to the Wall, and took the floor as well. That old rogue Ulmer of the Kingswood proved as adept at dancing as he was at archery, no doubt regaling his partners with his tales of the Kingswood Brotherhood, when he rode with Simon Toyne and Big Belly Ben and helped Wenda the White Fawn burn her mark in the buttocks of her highborn captives. Satin was all grace, dancing with three serving girls in turn but never presuming to approach a highborn lady. Jon judged that wise. He did not like the way some of the queen’s knights were looking at the steward, particularly Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain. *That one wants to shed a bit of blood,* he thought. *He is looking for some provocation.*

When Owen the Oaf began to dance with Patchface the fool, laughter echoed off the vaulted ceiling. The sight made Lady Alys smile. “Do you dance often, here at Castle Black?”

“Every time we have a wedding, my lady.”

“You could dance with me, you know. It would be only courteous. You danced with me anon.”

“Anon?” teased Jon. “When we were children.” She tore off a bit of bread and threw it at him. “As you know well.”

“My lady should dance with her husband.”

“My Magnar is not one for dancing, I fear. If you will not dance with me, at least pour me some of the mulled wine.”

“As you command.” He signaled for a flagon. “So,” said Alys, as Jon poured, “I am now a woman wed. A wildling husband with his own little wildling army.”

“Free folk is what they call themselves. Most, at least. The Thenns are a people apart, though. Very old.” Ygritte had told him that. *You know nothing, Jon Snow*. “They come from a hidden vale at the north end of the Frostfangs, surrounded by high peaks, and for thousands of years they’ve had more truck with the giants than with other men. It made them different.”

“Different,” she said, “but more like us.”

“Aye, my lady. The Thenns have lords and laws.” *They know how to kneel*. “They mine tin and copper for bronze, forge their own arms and armor instead of stealing it. A proud folk, and brave. Mance Rayder had to best the old Magnar thrice before Styr would accept him as King-Beyond-the-Wall.”

“And now they are here, on our side of the Wall. Driven from their mountain fastness and into my bedchamber.” She smiled a wry smile. “It is my own fault. My lord father told me I must charm your brother Robb, but I was only six and didn’t know how.”

Aye, but now you're almost six-and-ten, and we must pray you will know how to charm your new husband. “My lady, how do things stand at Karhold with your food stores?”

“Not well.” Alys sighed. “My father took so many of our men south with him that only the women and young boys were left to bring the harvest in. Them, and the men too old or crippled to go off to war. Crops withered in the fields or were pounded into the mud by autumn rains. And now the snows are come. This winter will be hard. Few of the old people will survive it, and many children will perish as well.”

It was a tale that any northmen knew well. “My father’s grandmother was a Flint of the mountains, on his mother’s side,” Jon told her. “The First Flints, they call themselves. They say the other Flints are the blood of younger sons, who had to leave the mountains to find food and land and wives. It has always been a harsh life up there. When the snows fall and food grows scarce, their young must travel to the winter town or take service at one castle or the other. The old men gather up what strength remains in them and announce that they are going hunting. Some are found come spring. More are never seen again.”

“It is much the same at Karhold.”

That did not surprise him. “When your stores begin to dwindle, my lady, remember us. Send your old men to the Wall, let them say our words. Here at least they will not die alone in the snow, with only memories to warm them. Send us boys as well, if you have boys to spare.”

“As you say.” She touched his hand. “Karhold remembers.”

The elk was being carved. It smelled better than Jon had any reason to expect. He dispatched a portion to Leathers out at Hardin’s Tower, along with three big platters of roast vegetables for Wun Wun, then ate a healthy slice himself. *Three-Finger Hobb’s acquitted himself well.* That had been a concern. Hobb had come to him two nights ago complaining that he’d joined the Night’s Watch to kill wildlings, not to cook for them. “Besides, I never done no wedding feast, m’lord. Black brothers don’t never take no wives. It’s in the bloody vows, I swear ’tis.”

Jon was washing the roast down with a sip of mulled wine when Clydas appeared at his elbow. “A bird,” he announced, and slipped a parchment into Jon’s hand. The note was sealed with a dot of hard black wax.

Eastwatch, Jon knew, even before he broke the seal. The letter had been written by Maester Harmune; Cotter Pyke could neither read nor write. But the words were Pyke’s, set down as he had spoken them, blunt and to the point.

I command from _ Talon, *Tattersalt second on Blackbird, Ser Glendon holds Eastwatch.*

“Dark wings, dark words?” asked Alys Karstark.

“No, my lady. This news was long awaited.” *Though the last part troubles me.* Glendon Hewett was a seasoned man and a strong one, a sensible choice to command in Cotter Pyke’s absence. But he was also as much a friend as Alliser Thorne could boast, and a crony of sorts with Janos Slynt, however briefly. Jon could still recall how Hewett had dragged him from his bed, and the feel of his boot slamming into his ribs. *Not the man I would have chosen.* He rolled the parchment up and slipped it into his belt.

The fish course was next, but as the pike was being boned Lady Alys dragged the Magnar up onto the floor. From the way he moved it was plain that Sigorn had never danced before, but he had drunk enough mulled wine so that it did not seem to matter.

“A northern maid and a wildling warrior, bound together by the Lord of Light.” Ser Axell Florent slipped into Lady Alys’s vacant seat. “Her Grace approves. I am close to her, my lord, so I know her mind. King Stannis will approve as well.”

Unless Roose Bolton has stuck his head on a spear. “Not all agree, alas.” Ser Axell’s beard was a ragged brush beneath his sagging chin; coarse hair sprouted from his ears and nostrils. “Ser Patrek feels he would have made a better match for Lady Alys. His lands were lost to him when he came north.”

“There are many in this hall who have lost far more than that,” said Jon, “and more who have given up their lives in service to the realm. Ser Patrek should count himself fortunate.”

Axell Florent smiled. “The king might say the same if he were here. Yet some provision must be made for His Grace’s leal knights, surely? They have followed him so far and at such cost. And we must needs bind these wildlings to king and realm. This marriage is a good first step, but I know that it would please the queen to see the wildling princess wed as well.”

Jon sighed. He was weary of explaining that Val was no true princess. No matter how often he told them, they never seemed to hear. “You are persistent, Ser Axell, I grant you that.”

“Do you blame me, my lord? Such a prize is not easily won. A nubile girl, I hear, and not hard to look upon. Good hips, good breasts, well made for whelping children.”

“Who would father these children? Ser Patrek? You?”

“Who better? We Florents have the blood of the old Gardener kings in our veins. Lady Melisandre could perform the rites, as she did for Lady Alys and the Magnar.”

“All you are lacking is a bride.”

“Easily remedied.” Florent’s smile was so false that it looked painful.

“Where is she, Lord Snow? Have you moved her to one of your other castles? Greyguard or the Shadow Tower? Whore’s Burrow, with t’other wenches?” He leaned close. “Some say you have her tucked away for your own pleasure. It makes no matter to me, so long as she is not with child. I’ll get my own sons on her. If you’ve broken her to saddle, well ... we are both men of the world, are we not?”

Jon had heard enough. “Ser Axell, if you are truly the Queen’s Hand, I pity Her Grace.”

Florent's face grew flushed with anger. "So it *is* true. You mean to keep her for yourself, I see it now. The bastard wants his father's seat."

The bastard refused his father's seat. If the bastard had wanted Val, all he had to do was ask for her. "You must excuse me, ser," he said. "I need a breath of fresh air." *It stinks in here.* His head turned. "That was a horn."

Others had heard it too. The music and the laughter died at once. Dancers froze in place, listening. Even Ghost pricked up his ears. "Did you hear that?" Queen Selyse asked her knights.

"A warhorn, Your Grace," said Ser Narbert.

The queen's hand went fluttering to her throat. "Are we under attack?"

"No, Your Grace," said Ulmer of the Kingswood. "It's the watchers on the Wall, is all."

One blast, thought Jon Snow. Rangers returning.

Then it came again. The sound seemed to fill the cellar. "Two blasts," said Mully.

Black brothers, northmen, free folk, Thenns, queen's men, all of them fell quiet, listening. Five heartbeats passed. Ten. Twenty. Then Owen the Oaf tittered, and Jon Snow could breathe again. "Two blasts," he announced. "Wildlings." *Val.*

Tormund Giantsbane had come at last.