

JON

He was not a tall man, Tormund Giantsbane, but the gods had given him a broad chest and massive belly. Mance Rayder had named him Tormund Horn-Blower for the power of his lungs, and was wont to say that Tormund could laugh the snow off mountaintops. In his wroth, his bellows reminded Jon of a mammoth trumpeting.

That day Tormund bellowed often and loudly. He roared, he shouted, he slammed his fist against the table so hard that a flagon of water overturned and spilled. A horn of mead was never far from his hand, so the spittle he sprayed when making threats was sweet with honey. He called Jon Snow a craven, a liar, and a turncloak, cursed him for a black-hearted buggering kneeler, a robber, and a carrion crow, accused him of wanting to fuck the free folk up the arse. Twice he flung his drinking horn at Jon's head, though only after he had emptied it. Tormund was not the sort of man to waste good mead. Jon let it all wash over him. He never raised his own voice nor answered threat with threat, but neither did he give more ground than he had come prepared to give.

Finally, as the shadows of the afternoon grew long outside the tent, Tormund Giantsbane—Tall-Talker, Horn-Blower, and Breaker of Ice, Tormund Thunderfist, Husband to Bears, Mead-King of Ruddy Hall, Speaker to Gods and Father of Hosts—thrust out his hand. “Done then, and may the gods forgive me. There’s a hundred mothers never will, I know.”

Jon clasped the offered hand. The words of his oath rang through his head. *I am the sword in the darkness. 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.* And for him a new refrain: *I am the guard who opened the gates and let the foe march through.* He would have given much and more to know that he was doing the right thing. But he had gone too far to turn back. “Done and done,” he said.

Tormund's grip was bone-crushing. That much had not changed about him. The beard was the same as well, though the face under that thicket of white hair had thinned considerably, and there were deep lines graven in those ruddy cheeks. "Mance should have killed you when he had the chance," he said as he did his best to turn Jon's hand to pulp and bone. "Gold for gruel, and boys ... a cruel price. Whatever happened to that sweet lad I knew?"

They made him lord commander. "A fair bargain leaves both sides unhappy, I've heard it said. Three days?"

"If I live that long. Some o' my own will spit on me when they hear these terms." Tormund released Jon's hand. "Your crows will grumble too, if I know them. And I ought to. I have killed more o' you black buggers than I can count."

"It might be best if you did not mention that so loudly when you come south of the Wall."

"Har!" Tormund laughed. That had not changed either; he still laughed easily and often. "Wise words. I'd not want you crows to peck me to death." He slapped Jon's back. "When all my folk are safe behind your Wall, we'll share a bit o' meat and mead. Till then ..." The wildling pulled off the band from his left arm and tossed it at Jon, then did the same with its twin upon his right. "Your first payment. Had those from my father and him from his. Now they're yours, you thieving black bastard."

The armbands were old gold, solid and heavy, engraved with the ancient runes of the First Men. Tormund Giantsbane had worn them as long as Jon had known him; they had seemed as much a part of him as his beard. "The Braavosi will melt these down for the gold. That seems a shame. Perhaps you ought to keep them."

"No. I'll not have it said that Tormund Thunderfist made the free folk give up their treasures whilst he kept his own." He grinned. "But I'll keep the ring I wear about me member. Much bigger than those little things. On you it'd be a torque."

Jon had to laugh. "You never change."

“Oh, I do.” The grin melted away like snow in summer. “I am not the man I was at Ruddy Hall. Seen too much death, and worse things too. My sons ...” Grief twisted Tormund’s face. “Dormund was cut down in the battle for the Wall, and him still half a boy. One o’ your king’s knights did for him, some bastard all in grey steel with moths upon his shield. I saw the cut, but my boy was dead before I reached him. And Torwynd ... it was the cold claimed him. Always sickly, that one. He just up and died one night. The worst o’ it, before we ever knew he’d died he rose pale with them blue eyes. Had to see to him m’self. That was hard, Jon.” Tears shone in his eyes. “He wasn’t much of a man, truth be told, but he’d been me little boy once, and I loved him.”

Jon put a hand on his shoulder. “I am so sorry.”

“Why? Weren’t you doing. There’s blood on your hands, aye, same as mine. But not his.” Tormund shook his head. “I still have two strong sons.”

“Your daughter ... ?”

“Munda.” That brought Tormund’s smile back. “Took that Longspear Ryk to husband, if you believe it. Boy’s got more cock than sense, you ask me, but he treats her well enough. I told him if he ever hurt her, I’d yank his member off and beat him bloody with it.” He gave Jon another hearty slap. “Time you were going back. Keep you any longer, they’re like to think we ate you.”

“Dawn, then. Three days from now. The boys first.”

“I heard you the first ten times, crow. A man’d think there was no trust between us.” He spat. “Boys first, aye. Mammoths go the long way round. You make sure Eastwatch expects them. I’ll make sure there’s no fighting, nor rushing at your bloody gate. Nice and orderly we’ll be, ducklings in a row. And me the mother duck. Har!” Tormund led Jon from his tent.

Outside the day was bright and cloudless. The sun had returned to the sky after a fortnight’s absence, and to the south the Wall rose blue-white and glittering. There was a saying Jon had heard from the older men at Castle Black: *the Wall has more moods than Mad King Aerys*, they’d say, or

sometimes, *the Wall has more moods than a woman*. On cloudy days it looked to be white rock. On moonless nights it was as black as coal. In snowstorms it seemed carved of snow. But on days like this, there was no mistaking it for anything but ice. On days like this the Wall shimmered bright as a septon's crystal, every crack and crevasse limned by sunlight, as frozen rainbows danced and died behind translucent ripples. On days like this the Wall was beautiful.

Tormund's eldest son stood near the horses, talking with Leathers. Tall Toregg, he was called amongst the free folk. Though he barely had an inch on Leathers, he overtopped his father by a foot. Hareth, the strapping Mole's Town boy called Horse, huddled near the fire, his back to the other two. He and Leathers were the only men Jon had brought with him to the parley; any more might have been seen as a sign of fear, and twenty men would have been of no more use than two if Tormund had been intent on blood. Ghost was the only protection Jon needed; the direwolf could sniff out foes, even those who hid their enmity behind smiles.

Ghost was gone, though. Jon peeled off one black glove, put two fingers in his mouth, and whistled. "*Ghost!* To me."

From above came the sudden sound of wings. Mormont's raven flapped from a limb of an old oak to perch upon Jon's saddle. "*Corn,*" it cried. "*Corn, corn, corn.*"

"Did you follow me as well?" Jon reached to shoo the bird away but ended up stroking its feathers. The raven cocked its eye at him. "*Snow,*" it muttered, bobbing its head knowingly. Then Ghost emerged from between two trees, with Val beside him.

They look as though they belong together. Val was clad all in white; white woolen breeches tucked into high boots of bleached white leather, white bearskin cloak pinned at the shoulder with a carved weirwood face, white tunic with bone fastenings. Her breath was white as well ... but her eyes were blue, her long braid the color of dark honey, her cheeks flushed red from the cold. It had been a long while since Jon Snow had seen a sight so lovely.

“Have you been trying to steal my wolf?” he asked her. “Why not? If every woman had a direwolf, men would be much sweeter. Even crows.”

“Har!” laughed Tormund Giantsbane. “Don’t bandy words with this one, Lord Snow, she’s too clever for the likes o’ you and me. Best steal her quick, before Toregg wakes up and takes her first.”

What had that oaf Axell Florent said of Val? *“A nubile girl, not hard to look upon. Good hips, good breasts, well made for whelping children.”* All true enough, but the wildling woman was so much more. She had proved that by finding Tormund where seasoned rangers of the Watch had failed. *She may not be a princess, but she would make a worthy wife for any lord.*

But that bridge had been burned a long time ago, and Jon himself had thrown the torch. “Toregg is welcome to her,” he announced. “I took a vow.”

“She won’t mind. Will you, girl?”

Val patted the long bone knife on her hip. “Lord Crow is welcome to steal into my bed any night he dares. Once he’s been gelded, keeping those vows will come much easier for him.”

“*Har!*” Tormund snorted again. “You hear that, Toregg? Stay away from this one. I have one daughter, don’t need another.” Shaking his head, the wildling chief ducked back inside his tent.

As Jon scratched Ghost behind the ear, Toregg brought up Val’s horse for her. She still rode the grey garron that Mully had given her the day she left the Wall, a shaggy, stunted thing blind in one eye. As she turned it toward the Wall, she asked, “How fares the little monster?”

“Twice as big as when you left us, and thrice as loud. When he wants the teat, you can hear him wail in Eastwatch.” Jon mounted his own horse.

Val fell in beside him. “So ... I brought you Tormund, as I said I would. What now? Am I to be returned to my old cell?”

“Your old cell is occupied. Queen Selyse has claimed the King’s Tower, for her own. Do you remember Hardin’s Tower?”

“The one that looks about to collapse?”

“It’s looked that way for a hundred years. I’ve had the top floor made ready for you, my lady. You will have more room than in the King’s Tower, though you may not be as comfortable. No one has ever called it Hardin’s Palace.”

“I would choose freedom over comfort every time.”

“Freedom of the castle you shall have, but I regret to say you must remain a captive. I can promise that you will not be troubled by unwanted visitors, however. My own men guard Hardin’s Tower, not the queen’s. And Wun Wun sleeps in the entry hall.”

“A giant as protector? Even Dalla could not boast of that.”

Tormund’s wildlings watched them pass, peering out from tents and lean-tos beneath leafless trees. For every man of fighting age, Jon saw three women and as many children, gaunt-faced things with hollow cheeks and staring eyes. When Mance Rayder had led the free folk down upon the Wall, his followers drove large herds of sheep and goats and swine before them, but now the only animals to be seen were the mammoths. If not for the ferocity of the giants, those would have been slaughtered too, he did not doubt. There was a lot of meat on a mammoth’s bones.

Jon saw signs of sickness too. That disquieted him more than he could say. If Tormund’s band were starved and sick, what of the thousands who had followed Mother Mole to Hardhome? *Cotter Pyke should reach them soon. If the winds were kind, his fleet might well be on its way back to Eastwatch even now, with as many of the free folk as he could cram aboard.*

“How did you fare with Tormund?” asked Val. “Ask me a year from now. The hard part still awaits me. The part where I convince mine own to eat this meal I’ve cooked for them. None of them are going to like the taste, I fear.”

“Let me help.”

“You have. You brought me Tormund.”

“I can do more.”

Why not? thought Jon. *They are all convinced she is a princess.* Val looked the part and rode as if she had been born on horseback. *A warrior princess,* he decided, *not some willowy creature who sits up in a tower, brushing her hair and waiting for some knight to rescue her.* “I must inform the queen of this agreement,” he said. “You are welcome to come meet her, if you can find it in yourself to bend a knee.” It would never do to offend Her Grace before he even opened his mouth.

“May I laugh when I kneel?”

“You may not. This is no game. A river of blood runs between our peoples, old and deep and red. Stannis Baratheon is one of the few who favors admitting wildlings to the realm. I need his queen’s support for what I’ve done.”

Val’s playful smile died. “You have my word, Lord Snow. I will be a proper wildling princess for your queen.”

She is not my queen, he might have said. *If truth be told, the day of her departure cannot come too fast for me. And if the gods are good, she will take Melisandre with her.*

They rode the rest of the way in silence, Ghost loping at their heels. Mormont’s raven followed them as far as the gate, then flapped upward as the rest of them dismounted. Horse went ahead with a brand to light the way through the icy tunnel.

A small crowd of black brothers was waiting by the gate when Jon and his companions emerged south of the Wall. Ulmer of the Kingswood was amongst them, and it was the old archer who came forward to speak for the rest. “If it please m’lord, the lads were wondering. Will it be peace, m’lord? Or blood and iron?”

“Peace,” Jon Snow replied. “Three days hence, Tormund Giantsbane will lead his people through the Wall. As friends, not foes. Some may even swell our ranks, as brothers. It will be for us to make them welcome. Now back to your duties.” Jon handed the reins of his horse to Satin. “I must see Queen Selyse.” Her Grace would take it as a slight if he did not come to her at once. “Afterward I will have letters to write. Bring parchment, quills, and a pot of maester’s black to my chambers. Then summon Marsh, Yarwyck, Septon Cellador, Clydas.” Cellador would be half-drunk, and Clydas was a poor substitute for a real maester, but they were what he had. *Till Sam returns*. “The northmen too. Flint and Norrey. Leathers, you should be there as well.”

“Hobb is baking onion pies,” said Satin. “Shall I request that they all join you for supper?”

Jon considered. “No. Ask them to join me atop the Wall at sunset.” He turned to Val. “My lady. With me, if you please.”

“The crow commands, the captive must obey.” Her tone was playful. “This queen of yours must be fierce if the legs of grown men give out beneath them when they meet her. Should I have dressed in mail instead of wool and fur? These clothes were given to me by Dalla, I would sooner not get bloodstains all over them.”

“If words drew blood, you might have cause to fear. I think your clothes are safe enough, my lady.”

They made their way toward the King’s Tower, along fresh-shoveled pathways between mounds of dirty snow. “I have heard it said that your queen has a great dark beard.”

Jon knew he should not smile, but he did. “Only a mustache. Very wispy. You can count the hairs.”

“How disappointing.”

For all her talk about wanting to be mistress of her seat, Selyse Baratheon seemed in no great haste to abandon the comforts of Castle Black for the

shadows of the Nightfort. She kept guards, of course—four men posted at the door, two outside on the steps, two inside by the brazier. Commanding them was Ser Patrek of King's Mountain, clad in his knightly raiment of white and blue and silver, his cloak a spatter of five-pointed stars. When presented to Val, the knight sank to one knee to kiss her glove. "You are even lovelier than I was told, princess," he declared. "The queen has told me much and more of your beauty."

"How odd, when she has never seen me." Val patted Ser Patrek on the head. "Up with you now, ser kneeler. Up, up." She sounded as if she were talking to a dog.

It was all that Jon could do not to laugh. Stone-faced, he told the knight that they required audience with the queen. Ser Patrek sent one of the men-at-arms scrambling up the steps to inquire as to whether Her Grace would receive them. "The wolf stays here, though," Ser Patrek insisted.

Jon had expected that. The direwolf made Queen Selyse anxious, almost as much as Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun. "Ghost, stay."

They found Her Grace sewing by the fire, whilst her fool danced about to music only he could hear, the cowbells on his antlers *clanging*. "The crow, the crow," Patchface cried when he saw Jon. "Under the sea the crows are white as snow, I know, I know, oh, oh, oh." Princess Shireen was curled up in a window seat, her hood drawn up to hide the worst of the greyscale that had disfigured her face.

There was no sign of Lady Melisandre. For that much Jon was grateful. Soon or late he would need to face the red priestess, but he would sooner it was not in the queen's presence. "Your Grace." He took a knee. Val did likewise.

Queen Selyse set aside her sewing. "You may rise."

"If it please Your Grace, may I present the Lady Val? Her sister Dalla was ___"

“—mother to that squalling babe who keeps us awake at night. I know who she is, Lord Snow.” The queen sniffed. “You are fortunate that she returned to us before the king my husband, else it might have gone badly for you. Very badly indeed.”

“Are you the wildling princess?” Shireen asked Val. “Some call me that,” said Val. “My sister was wife to Mance Rayder, the King-Beyond-the-Wall. She died giving him a son.”

“I’m a princess too,” Shireen announced, “but I never had a sister. I used to have a cousin once, before he sailed away. He was just a bastard, but I liked him.”

“Honestly, Shireen,” her mother said. “I am sure the lord commander did not come to hear about Robert’s by-blows. Patchface, be a good fool and take the princess to her room.”

The bells on his hat rang. “Away, away,” the fool sang. “Come with me beneath the sea, away, away, away.” He took the little princess by one hand and drew her from the room, skipping.

Jon said, “Your Grace, the leader of the free folk has agreed to my terms.”

Queen Selyse gave the tiniest of nods. “It was ever my lord husband’s wish to grant sanctuary to these savage peoples. So long as they keep the king’s peace and the king’s laws, they are welcome in our realm.” She pursed her lips. “I am told they have more giants with them.”

Val answered. “Almost two hundred of them, Your Grace. And more than eighty mammoths.”

The queen shuddered. “Dreadful creatures.” Jon could not tell if she was speaking of the mammoths or the giants. “Though such beasts might be useful to my lord husband in his battles.”

“That may be, Your Grace,” Jon said, “but the mammoths are too big to pass through our gate.”

“Cannot the gate be widened?”

“That ... that would be unwise, I think.”

Selyse sniffed. “If you say so. No doubt you know about such things. Where do you mean to settle these wildlings? Surely Mole’s Town is not large enough to contain ... how many are they?”

“Four thousand, Your Grace. They will help us garrison our abandoned castles, the better to defend the Wall.”

“I had been given to understand that those castles were ruins. Dismal places, bleak and cold, hardly more than heaps of rubble. At Eastwatch we heard talk of rats and spiders.”

The cold will have killed the spiders by now, thought Jon, and the rats may be a useful source of meat come winter. “All true, Your Grace ... but even ruins offer some shelter. And the Wall will stand between them and the Others.”

“I see you have considered all this carefully, Lord Snow. I am sure King Stannis will be pleased when he returns triumphant from his battle.”

Assuming he returns at all. “Of course,” the queen went on, “the wildlings must first acknowledge Stannis as their king and R’hllor as their god.”

And here we are, face-to-face in the narrow passage. “Your Grace, forgive me. Those were not the terms that we agreed to.”

The queen’s face hardened. “A grievous oversight.” What faint traces of warmth her voice had held vanished all at once.

“Free folk do not kneel,” Val told her. “Then they must be knelt,” the queen declared. “Do that, Your Grace, and we will rise again at the first chance,” Val promised. “Rise with blades in hand.”

The queen’s lips tightened, and her chin gave a small quiver. “You are insolent. I suppose that is only to be expected of a wildling. We must find you a husband who can teach you courtesy.” The queen turned her glare on

Jon. "I do not approve, Lord Commander. Nor will my lord husband. I cannot prevent you from opening your gate, as we both know full well, but I promise you that you shall answer for it when the king returns from battle. Mayhaps you might want to reconsider."

"Your Grace." Jon knelt again. This time Val did not join him. "I am sorry my actions have displeased you. I did as I thought best. Do I have your leave to go?"

"You do. At once."

Once outside and well away from the queen's men, Val gave vent to her wrath. "You lied about her beard. That one has more hair on her chin than I have between my legs. And the daughter ... her face ..."

"Greyscale."

"The grey death is what we call it."

"It is not always mortal in children."

"North of the Wall it is. Hemlock is a sure cure, but a pillow or a blade will work as well. If I had given birth to that poor child, I would have given her the gift of mercy long ago."

This was a Val that Jon had never seen before. "Princess Shireen is the queen's only child."

"I pity both of them. The child is not clean."

"If Stannis wins his war, Shireen will stand as heir to the Iron Throne."

"Then I pity your Seven Kingdoms."

"The maesters say greyscale is not—"

"The maesters may believe what they wish. Ask a woods witch if you would know the truth. The grey death sleeps, only to wake again. *The child is not clean!*"

“She seems a sweet girl. You cannot know—”

“I can. You know nothing, Jon Snow.” Val seized his arm. “I want the monster out of there. Him and his wet nurses. You cannot leave them in that same tower as the dead girl.”

Jon shook her hand away. “*She is not dead.*” “She is. Her mother cannot see it. Nor you, it seems. Yet death is there.” She walked away from him, stopped, turned back. “I brought you Tormund Giantsbane. Bring me my monster.”

“If I can, I will.”

“Do. You owe me a debt, Jon Snow.”

Jon watched her stride away. *She is wrong. She must be wrong. Greyscale is not so deadly as she claims, not in children.*

Ghost was gone again. The sun was low in the west. *A cup of hot spiced wine would serve me well just now. Two cups would serve me even better.* But that would have to wait. He had foes to face. Foes of the worst sort: brothers.

He found Leathers waiting for him by the winch cage. The two of them rode up together. The higher they went, the stronger the wind. Fifty feet up, the heavy cage began to sway with every gust. From time to time it scraped against the Wall, starting small crystalline showers of ice that sparkled in the sunlight as they fell. They rose above the tallest towers of the castle. At four hundred feet the wind had teeth, and tore at his black cloak so it slapped noisily at the iron bars. At seven hundred it cut right through him. *The Wall is mine*, Jon reminded himself as the winchmen were swinging in the cage, *for two more days, at least.*

Jon hopped down onto the ice, thanked the men on the winch, and nodded to the spearmen standing sentry. Both wore woolen hoods pulled down over their heads, so nothing could be seen of their faces but their eyes, but he knew Ty by the tangled rope of greasy black hair falling down his back and Owen by the sausage stuffed into the scabbard at his hip. He might have

known them anyway, just by the way they stood. *A good lord must know his men*, his father had once told him and Robb, back at Winterfell.

Jon walked to the edge of the Wall and gazed down upon the killing ground where Mance Rayder's host had died. He wondered where Mance was now. *Did he ever find you, little sister? Or were you just a ploy he used so I would set him free?*

It had been so long since he had last seen Arya. What would she look like now? Would he even know her? *Arya Underfoot. Her face was always dirty.* Would she still have that little sword he'd had Mikken forge for her? *Stick them with the pointy end*, he'd told her. Wisdom for her wedding night if half of what he heard of Ramsay Snow was true. *Bring her home, Mance. I saved your son from Melisandre, and now I am about to save four thousand of your free folk. You owe me this one little girl.*

In the haunted forest to the north, the shadows of the afternoon crept through the trees. The western sky was a blaze of red, but to the east the first stars were peeking out. Jon Snow flexed the fingers of his sword hand, remembering all he'd lost. *Sam, you sweet fat fool, you played me a cruel jape when you made me lord commander. A lord commander has no friends.*

"Lord Snow?" said Leathers. "The cage is coming up."

"I hear it." Jon moved back from the edge.

First to make the ascent were the clan chiefs Flint and Norrey, clad in fur and iron. The Norrey looked like some old fox—wrinkled and slight of build, but sly-eyed and spry. Torghen Flint was half a head shorter but must weigh twice as much—a stout gruff man with gnarled, red-knuckled hands as big as hams, leaning heavily on a blackthorn cane as he limped across the ice. Bowen Marsh came next, bundled up in a bearskin. After him Othell Yarwyck. Then Septon Cellador, half in his cups.

"Walk with me," Jon told them. They walked west along the Wall, down gravel-strewn paths toward the setting sun. When they had come fifty yards from the warming shed, he said, "You know why I've summoned you."

Three days hence at dawn the gate will open, to allow Tormund and his people through the Wall. There is much we need to do in preparation.”

Silence greeted his pronouncement. Then Othell Yarwyck said, “Lord Commander, there are *thousands* of—”

“—scrawny wildlings, bone weary, hungry, far from home.” Jon pointed at the lights of their campfires. “There they are. Four thousand, Tormund claims.”

“Three thousand, I make them, by the fires.” Bowen Marsh lived for counts and measures. “More than twice that number at Hardhome with the woods witch, we are told. And Ser Denys writes of great camps in the mountains beyond the Shadow Tower ...”

Jon did not deny it. “Tormund says the Weeper means to try the Bridge of Skulls again.”

The Old Pomegranate touched his scar. He had gotten it defending the Bridge of Skulls the last time the Weeping Man had tried to cut his way across the Gorge. “Surely the lord commander cannot mean to allow that ... that demon through as well?”

“Not gladly.” Jon had not forgotten the heads the Weeping Man had left him, with bloody holes where their eyes had been. *Black Jack Bulwer, Hairy Hal, Garth Greyfeather. I cannot avenge them, but I will not forget their names.* “But yes, my lord, him as well. We cannot pick and choose amongst the free folk, saying this one may pass, this one may not. Peace means peace for all.”

The Norrey hawked and spat. “As well make peace with wolves and carrion crows.”

“It’s peaceful in my dungeons,” grumbled Old Flint. “Give the Weeping Man to me.”

“How many rangers has the Weeper killed?” asked Othell Yarwyck. “How many women has he raped or killed or stolen?”

“Three of mine own ilk,” said Old Flint. “And he blinds the girls he does not take.”

“When a man takes the black, his crimes are forgiven,” Jon reminded them. “If we want the free folk to fight beside us, we must pardon their past crimes as we would for our own.”

“The Weeper will not say the words,” insisted Yarwyck. “He will not wear the cloak. Even other raiders do not trust him.”

“You need not trust a man to use him.” *Else how could I make use of all of you?* “We need the Weeper, and others like him. Who knows the wild better than a wildling? Who knows our foes better than a man who has fought them?”

“All the Weeper knows is rape and murder,” said Yarwyck.

“Once past the Wall, the wildlings will have thrice our numbers,” said Bowen Marsh. “And that is only Tormund’s band. Add the Weeper’s men and those at Hardhome, and they will have the strength to end the Night’s Watch in a single night.”

“Numbers alone do not win a war. You have not seen them. Half of them are dead on their feet.”

“I would sooner have them dead in the ground,” said Yarwyck. “If it please my lord.”

“It does *not* please me.” Jon’s voice was as cold as the wind snapping at their cloaks. “There are children in that camp, hundreds of them, thousands. Women as well.”

“Spearwives.”

“Some. Along with mothers and grandmothers, widows and maids ... would you condemn them all to die, my lord?”

“Brothers should not squabble,” Septon Cellador said. “Let us kneel and pray to the Crone to light our way to wisdom.”

“Lord Snow,” said The Norrey, “where do you mean to put these wild-lings o’ yours? Not on *my* lands, I hope.”

“Aye,” declared Old Flint. “You want them in the Gift, that’s your folly, but see they don’t wander off or I’ll send you back their heads. Winter is nigh, I want no more mouths to feed.”

“The wildlings will remain upon the Wall,” Jon assured them. “Most will be housed in one of our abandoned castles.” The Watch now had garrisons at Icemark, Long Barrow, Sable Hall, Greyguard, and Deep Lake, all badly undermanned, but ten castles still stood empty and abandoned. “Men with wives and children, all orphan girls and any orphan boys below the age of ten, old women, widowed mothers, any woman who does not care to fight. The spearwives we’ll send to Long Barrow to join their sisters, single men to the other forts we’ve reopened. Those who take the black will remain here, or be posted to Eastwatch or the Shadow Tower. Tormund will take Oakenshield as his seat, to keep him close at hand.”

Bowen Marsh sighed. “If they do not slay us with their swords, they will do so with their mouths. Pray, how does the lord commander propose to feed Tormund and his thousands?”

Jon had anticipated that question. “Through Eastwatch. We will bring in food by ship, as much as might be required. From the riverlands and the stormlands and the Vale of Arryn, from Dorne and the Reach, across the narrow sea from the Free Cities.”

“And this food will be paid for ... how, if I may ask?”

With gold, from the Iron Bank of Braavos, Jon might have replied. Instead he said, “I have agreed that the free folk may keep their furs and pelts. They will need those for warmth when winter comes. All other wealth they must surrender. Gold and silver, amber, gemstones, carvings, anything of value. We will ship it all across the narrow sea to be sold in the Free Cities.”

“All the wealth o’ the wildlings,” said The Norrey. “That should buy you a bushel o’ barleycorn. Two bushels, might be.”

“Lord Commander, why not demand that the wildlings give up their arms as well?” asked Clydas.

Leathers laughed at that. “You want the free folk to fight beside you against the common foe. How are we to do that without arms? Would you have us throw snowballs at the wights? Or will you give us sticks to hit them with?”

The arms most wildlings carry are little more than sticks, thought Jon. Wooden clubs, stone axes, mauls, spears with fire-hardened points, knives of bone and stone and dragonglass, wicker shields, bone armor, boiled leather. The Thenns worked bronze, and raiders like the Weeper carried stolen steel and iron swords looted off some corpse ... but even those were oft of ancient vintage, dented from years of hard use and spotted with rust.

“Tormund Giantsbane will never willingly disarm his people,” Jon said. “He is not the Weeping Man, but he is no craven either. If I had asked that of him, it would have come to blood.”

The Norrey fingered his beard. “You may put your wildlings in these ruined forts, Lord Snow, but how will you make them stay? What is there to stop them moving south to fairer, warmer lands?”

“*Our* lands,” said Old Flint. “Tormund has given me his oath. He will serve with us until the spring. The Weeper and their other captains will swear the same or we will not let them pass.”

Old Flint shook his head. “They will betray us.”

“The Weeper’s word is worthless,” said Othell Yarwyck. “These are godless savages,” said Septon Cellador. “Even in the south the treachery of wildlings is renowned.”

Leathers crossed his arms. “That battle down below? I was on t’other side, remember? Now I wear your blacks and train your boys to kill. Some might call me turncloak. Might be so ... but I am no more savage than you crows. We have gods too. The same gods they keep in Winterfell.”

“The gods of the North, since before this Wall was raised,” said Jon. “Those are the gods that Tormund swore by. He will keep his word. I know him, as I knew Mance Rayder. I marched with them for a time, you may recall.”

“I had not forgotten,” said the Lord Steward.

No, thought Jon, *I did not think you had*. “Mance Rayder swore an oath as well,” Marsh went on. “He vowed to wear no crowns, take no wife, father no sons. Then he turned his cloak, did all those things, and led a fearsome host against the realm. It is the remnants of that host that waits beyond the Wall.”

“Broken remnants.”

“A broken sword can be reforged. A broken sword can kill.”

“The free folk have neither laws nor lords,” Jon said, “but they love their children. Will you admit that much?”

“It is not their children who concern us. We fear the fathers, not the sons.”

“As do I. So I insisted upon hostages.” *I am not the trusting fool you take me for ... nor am I half wildling, no matter what you believe*. “One hundred boys between the ages of eight and sixteen. A son from each of their chiefs and captains, the rest chosen by lot. The boys will serve as pages and squires, freeing our own men for other duties. Some may choose to take the black one day. Queerer things have happened. The rest will stand hostage for the loyalty of their sires.”

The northmen glanced at one another. “Hostages,” mused The Norrey. “Tormund has agreed to this?”

It was that, or watch his people die. “My blood price, he called it,” said Jon Snow, “but he will pay.”

“Aye, and why not?” Old Flint stomped his cane against the ice. “Wards, we always called them, when Winterfell demanded boys of us, but they were hostages, and none the worse for it.”

“None but them whose sires displeased the Kings o’ Winter,” said The Norrey. “Those came home shorter by a head. So you tell me, boy ... if these wildling friends o’ yours prove false, do you have the belly to do what needs be done?”

Ask Janos Slynt. “Tormund Giantsbane knows better than to try me. I may seem a green boy in your eyes, Lord Norrey, but I am still a son of Eddard Stark.”

Yet even that did not appease his Lord Steward. “You say these boys will serve as squires. Surely the lord commander does not mean they will be trained *at arms*?”

Jon’s anger flared. “No, my lord, I mean to set them to sewing lacy smallclothes. Of course they shall be trained at arms. They shall also churn butter, hew firewood, muck stables, empty chamber pots, and run messages ... and in between they will be drilled with spear and sword and longbow.”

Marsh flushed a deeper shade of red. “The lord commander must pardon my bluntness, but I have no softer way to say this. What you propose is nothing less than treason. For eight thousand years the men of the Night’s Watch have stood upon the Wall and fought these wildlings. Now you mean to let them pass, to shelter them in our castles, to feed them and clothe them and teach them how to fight. Lord Snow, must I remind you? *You swore an oath.*”

“I know what I swore.” Jon said the words. “*I am the sword in the darkness. 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.* Were those the same words you said when you took your vows?”

“They were. As the lord commander knows.”

“Are you certain that I have not forgotten some? The ones about the king and his laws, and how we must defend every foot of his land and cling to each ruined castle? How does that part go?” Jon waited for an answer. None

came. *“I am the shield that guards the realms of men. Those are the words. So tell me, my lord— what are these wildlings, if not men?”*

Bowen Marsh opened his mouth. No words came out. A flush crept up his neck.

Jon Snow turned away. The last light of the sun had begun to fade. He watched the cracks along the Wall go from red to grey to black, from streaks of fire to rivers of black ice. Down below, Lady Melisandre would be lighting her nightfire and chanting, *Lord of Light, defend us, for the night is dark and full of terrors.*

“Winter is coming,” Jon said at last, breaking the awkward silence, “and with it the white walkers. The Wall is where we stop them. The Wall was *made* to stop them ... but the Wall must be manned. This discussion is at an end. We have much to do before the gate is opened. Tormund and his people will need to be fed and clothed and housed. Some are sick and will need nursing. Those will fall to you, Clydas. Save as many as you can.”

Clydas blinked his dim pink eyes. “I will do my best, Jon. My lord, I mean.”

“We will need every cart and wagon made ready to transport the free folk to their new homes. Othell, you shall see to that.”

Yarwyck grimaced. “Aye, Lord Commander.”

“Lord Bowen, you shall collect the tolls. The gold and silver, the amber, the torques and armbands and necklaces. Sort it all, count it, see that it reaches Eastwatch safely.”

“Yes, Lord Snow,” said Bowen Marsh.

And Jon thought, *“Ice,” she said, “and daggers in the dark. Blood frozen red and hard, and naked steel.”* His sword hand flexed. The wind was rising.