

JON

Jon Snow read the letter over until the words began to blur and run together. *I cannot sign this. I will not sign this.*

He almost burned the parchment then and there. Instead he took a sip of ale, the dregs of the half cup that remained from his solitary supper the night before. *I have to sign it. They chose me to be their lord commander. The Wall is mine, and the Watch as well. The Night's Watch takes no part.*

It was a relief when Dolorous Edd Tollett opened the door to tell him that Gilly was without. Jon set Maester Aemon's letter aside. "I will see her." He dreaded this. "Find Sam for me. I will want to speak with him next."

"He'll be down with the books. My old septon used to say that books are dead men talking. Dead men should keep quiet, is what I say. No one wants to hear a dead man's yabber." Dolorous Edd went off muttering of worms and spiders.

When Gilly entered, she went at once to her knees. Jon came around the table and drew her to her feet. "You don't need to take a knee for me. That's just for kings." Though a wife and mother, Gilly still seemed half a child to him, a slender little thing wrapped up in one of Sam's old cloaks. The cloak was so big on her that she could have hidden several other girls beneath its folds. "The babes are well?" he asked her.

The wildling girl smiled timidly from under her cowl. "Yes, m'lord. I was scared I wouldn't have milk enough for both, but the more they suck, the more I have. They're strong."

"I have something hard to tell you." He almost said *ask*, but caught himself at the last instant.

"Is it Mance? Val begged the king to spare him. She said she'd let some kneeler marry her and never slit his throat if only Mance could live. That Lord o'Bones, he's to be spared. Craster always swore he'd kill him if he

ever showed his face about the keep. Mance never did half the things he done.”

All Mance ever did was lead an army down upon the realm he once swore to protect. “Mance said our words, Gilly. Then he turned his cloak, wed Dalla, and crowned himself King-Beyond-the-Wall. His life is in the king’s hands now. It’s not him we need to talk about. It’s his son. Dalla’s boy.”

“The babe?” Her voice trembled. “He never broke no oath, m’lord. He sleeps and cries and sucks, is all; he’s never done no harm to no one. Don’t let her burn him. Save him, please.”

“Only you can do that, Gilly.” Jon told her how.

Another woman would have shrieked at him, cursed him, damned him down to seven hells. Another woman might have flown at him in rage, slapped him, kicked him, raked at his eyes with her nails. Another woman might have thrown her defiance in his teeth.

Gilly shook her head. “No. Please, no.”

The raven picked up the word. “*No*,” it screamed. “Refuse, and the boy will burn. Not on the morrow, nor the day after ... but soon, whenever Melisandre needs to wake a dragon or raise a wind or work some other spell requiring king’s blood. Mance will be ash and bone by then, so she will claim his son for the fire, and Stannis will not deny her. If you do not take the boy away, *she will burn him.*”

“I’ll go,” said Gilly. “I’ll take him, I’ll take the both o’ them, Dalla’s boy *and* mine.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. If not for the way the candle made them glisten, Jon might never have known that she was weeping. *Craster’s wives would have taught their daughters to shed their tears into a pillow. Perhaps they went outside to weep, well away from Craster’s fists.*

Jon closed the fingers of his sword hand. “Take both boys and the queen’s men will ride after you and drag you back. The boy will still burn ... and you with him.” *If I comfort her, she may think that tears can move me. She*

has to realize that I will not yield. “You’ll take one boy, and that one Dalla’s.”

“A mother can’t leave her son, or else she’s cursed forever. Not a *son*. We *saved* him, Sam and me. Please. Please, m’lord. We saved him from the cold.”

“Men say that freezing to death is almost peaceful. Fire, though ... do you see the candle, Gilly?”

She looked at the flame. “Yes.”

“Touch it. Put your hand over the flame.”

Her big brown eyes grew bigger still. She did not move. “Do it.” *Kill the boy.* “Now.”

Trembling, the girl reached out her hand, held it well above the flickering candle flame.

“Down. Let it kiss you.”

Gilly lowered her hand. An inch. Another. When the flame licked her flesh, she snatched her hand back and began to sob.

“Fire is a cruel way to die. Dalla died to give this child life, but you have nourished him, cherished him. You saved your own boy from the ice. Now save hers from the fire.”

“They’ll burn my babe, then. The red woman. If she can’t have Dalla’s, she’ll burn mine.”

“Your son has no king’s blood. Melisandre gains nothing by giving him to the fire. Stannis wants the free folk to fight for him, he will not burn an innocent without good cause. Your boy will be safe. I will find a wet nurse for him and he’ll be raised here at Castle Black under my protection. He’ll learn to hunt and ride, to fight with sword and axe and bow. I’ll even see that he is taught to read and write.” Sam would like that. “And when he is

old enough, he will learn the truth of who he is. He'll be free to seek you out if that is what he wants."

"You will make a crow of him." She wiped at her tears with the back of a small pale hand. "I won't. I won't."

Kill the boy, thought Jon. "You will. Else I promise you, the day that they burn Dalla's boy, yours will die as well."

"*Die*," shrieked the Old Bear's raven. "*Die, die, die.*"

The girl sat hunched and shrunken, staring at the candle flame, tears glistening in her eyes. Finally Jon said, "You have my leave to go. Do not speak of this, but see that you are ready to depart an hour before first light. My men will come for you."

Gilly got to her feet. Pale and wordless, she departed, with never a look back at him. Jon heard her footsteps as she rushed through the armory. She was almost running.

When he went to close the door, Jon saw that Ghost was stretched out beneath the anvil, gnawing on the bone of an ox. The big white direwolf looked up at his approach. "Past time that you were back." He returned to his chair, to read over Maester Aemon's letter once again.

Samwell Tarly turned up a few moments later, clutching a stack of books. No sooner had he entered than Mormont's raven flew at him demanding corn. Sam did his best to oblige, offering some kernels from the sack beside the door. The raven did its best to peck through his palm. Sam yowled, the bird flapped off, corn scattered. "Did that wretch break the skin?" Jon asked.

Sam gingerly removed his glove. "He did. I'm *bleeding*."

"We all shed our blood for the Watch. Wear thicker gloves." Jon shoved a chair toward him with a foot. "Sit, and have a look at this." He handed Sam the parchment.

“What is it?”

“A paper shield.”

Sam read it slowly. “A letter to King Tommen?”

“At Winterfell, Tommen fought my brother Bran with wooden swords,” Jon said, remembering. “He wore so much padding he looked like a stuffed goose. Bran knocked him to the ground.” He went to the window and threw the shutters open. The air outside was cold and bracing, though the sky was a dull grey. “Yet Bran’s dead, and pudgy pink-faced Tommen is sitting on the Iron Throne, with a crown nestled amongst his golden curls.”

That got an odd look from Sam, and for a moment he looked as if he wanted to say something. Instead he swallowed and turned back to the parchment. “You haven’t signed the letter.”

Jon shook his head. “The Old Bear begged the Iron Throne for help a hundred times. They sent him Janos Slynt. No letter will make the Lannisters love us better. Not once they hear that we’ve been helping Stannis.”

“Only to defend the Wall, not in his rebellion. That’s what it *says* here.”

“The distinction may escape Lord Tywin.” Jon snatched the letter back. “Why would he help us now? He never did before.”

“Well, he will not want it said that Stannis rode to the defense of the realm whilst King Tommen was playing with his toys. That would bring scorn down upon House Lannister.”

“It’s death and destruction I want to bring down upon House Lannister, not scorn.” Jon read from the letter. “*The Night’s Watch takes no part in the wars of the Seven Kingdoms. Our oaths are sworn to the realm, and the realm now stands in dire peril. Stannis Baratheon aids us against our foes from beyond the Wall, though we are not his men ...*”

Sam squirmed in his seat. “Well, we’re *not*. Are we?”

“I gave Stannis food, shelter, and the Nightfort, plus leave to settle some free folk in the Gift. That’s all.”

“Lord Tywin will say it was too much.”

“Stannis says it’s not enough. The more you give a king, the more he wants. We are walking on a bridge of ice with an abyss on either side. Pleasing one king is difficult enough. Pleasing two is hardly possible.”

“Yes, but ... if the Lannisters should prevail and Lord Tywin decides that we betrayed the king by aiding Stannis, it could mean the end of the Night’s Watch. He has the Tyrells behind him, with all the strength of Highgarden. And he did defeat Lord Stannis on the Blackwater.”

“The Blackwater was one battle. Robb won all his battles and still lost his head. If Stannis can raise the north ...”

Sam hesitated, then said, “The Lannisters have northmen of their own. Lord Bolton and his bastard.”

“Stannis has the Karstarks. If he can win White Harbor ...”

“If,” Sam stressed. “If not ... my lord, even a paper shield is better than none.”

“I suppose so.” *Him and Aemon both.* Somehow he had hoped that Sam Tarly might see it differently. *It is only ink and parchment.* Resigned, he grabbed the quill and signed. “Get the sealing wax.” *Before I change my mind.* Sam hastened to obey. Jon fixed the lord commander’s seal and handed him the letter. “Take this to Maester Aemon when you leave, and tell him to dispatch a bird to King’s Landing.”

“I will.” Sam sounded relieved. “My lord, if I might ask ... I saw Gilly leaving. She was almost crying.”

“Val sent her to plead for Mance again,” Jon lied, and they talked for a while of Mance and Stannis and Melisandre of Asshai, until the raven ate the last corn kernel and screamed, “*Blood.*”

“I am sending Gilly away,” Jon said. “Her and the boy. We will need to find another wet nurse for his milk brother.”

“Goat’s milk might serve, until you do. It’s better for a babe than cow’s milk.” Talking about breasts plainly made Sam uncomfortable, and suddenly he began to speak of history, and boy commanders who had lived and died hundreds of years ago. Jon cut him off with, “Tell me something useful. Tell me of our enemy.”

“The Others.” Sam licked his lips. “They are mentioned in the annals, though not as often as I would have thought. The annals I’ve found and looked at, that is. There’s more I haven’t found, I know. Some of the older books are falling to pieces. The pages crumble when I try and turn them. And the *really* old books ... either they have crumbled all away or they are buried somewhere that I haven’t looked yet or ... well, it could be that there are no such books and never were. The oldest histories we have were written after the Andals came to Westeros. The First Men only left us runes on rocks, so everything we think we know about the Age of Heroes and the Dawn Age and the Long Night comes from accounts set down by septons thousands of years later. There are archmaesters at the Citadel who question all of it. Those old histories are full of kings who reigned for hundreds of years, and knights riding around a thousand years before there *were* knights. You know the tales, Brandon the Builder, Symeon Star-Eyes, Night’s King ... we say that you’re the nine-hundred-and-ninety-eighth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, but the oldest list I’ve found shows six hundred seventy-four commanders, which suggests that it was written during—”

“Long ago,” Jon broke in. “What about the Others?”

“I found mention of dragonglass. The children of the forest used to give the Night’s Watch a hundred obsidian daggers every year, during the Age of Heroes. The Others come when it is cold, most of the tales agree. Or else it gets cold when they come. Sometimes they appear during snowstorms and melt away when the skies clear. They hide from the light of the sun and emerge by night ... or else night falls when they emerge. Some stories speak of them riding the corpses of dead animals. Bears, direwolves, mammoths, horses, it makes no matter, so long as the beast is dead. The one that killed Small Paul was riding a dead horse, so that part’s plainly true.

Some accounts speak of giant ice spiders too. I don't know what those are. Men who fall in battle against the Others must be burned, or else the dead will rise again as their thralls."

"We knew all this. The question is, how do we fight them?"

"The armor of the Others is proof against most ordinary blades, if the tales can be believed, and their own swords are so cold they shatter steel. Fire will dismay them, though, and they are vulnerable to obsidian. I found one account of the Long Night that spoke of the last hero slaying Others with a blade of dragonsteel. Supposedly they could not stand against it."

"Dragonsteel?" The term was new to Jon. "*Valyrian* steel?"

"That was my first thought as well."

"So if I can just convince the lords of the Seven Kingdoms to give us their Valyrian blades, all is saved? That won't be hard." *No harder than asking them to give up their coin and castles.* He gave a bitter laugh. "Did you find who the Others are, where they come from, what they want?"

"Not yet, my lord, but it may be that I've just been reading the wrong books. There are hundreds I have not looked at yet. Give me more time and I will find whatever there is to be found."

"There is no more time. You need to get your things together, Sam. You're going with Gilly."

"Going?" Sam gaped at him openmouthed, as if he did not understand the meaning of the word. "I'm going? To Eastwatch, my lord? Or ... where am I ..."

"Oldtown."

"*Oldtown?*" Sam repeated, in a high-pitched squeak. "Aemon as well."

"Aemon? *Maester* Aemon? But ... he's one hundred and two years old, my lord, he can't ... you're sending him *and* me? Who will tend the ravens? If there's sick or wounded, who ..."

“Clydas. He’s been with Aemon for years.”

“Clydas is only a steward, and his eyes are going bad. You need a *maester*. Maester Aemon is so frail, a sea voyage ... it might ... he’s old, and ...”

“His life will be at risk. I am aware of that, Sam, but the risk is greater here. Stannis knows who Aemon is. If the red woman requires king’s blood for her spells ...”

“Oh.” Sam’s fat cheeks seemed to drain of color. “Dareon will join you at Eastwatch. My hope is that his songs will win some men for us in the south. The *Blackbird* will deliver you to Braavos. From there, you’ll arrange your own passage to Oldtown. If you still mean to claim Gilly’s babe as your bastard, send her and the child on to Horn Hill. Elsewise, Aemon will find a servant’s place for her at the Citadel.”

“My b-b-bastard. Yes, I ... my mother and my sisters will help Gilly with the child. Dareon could see her to Oldtown just as well as me. I’m ... I’ve been working at my archery every afternoon with Ulmer, as you commanded ... well, except when I’m in the vaults, but you told me to find out about the Others. The longbow makes my shoulders ache and raises blisters on my fingers.” He showed Jon his hand. “I still do it, though. I can hit the target more often than not now, but I’m still the worst archer who ever bent a bow. I like Ulmer’s stories, though. Someone needs to write them down and put them in a book.”

“You do it. They have parchment and ink at the Citadel, as well as longbows. I will expect you to continue with your practice. Sam, the Night’s Watch has hundreds of men who can loose an arrow, but only a handful who can read or write. I need you to become my new maester.”

“My lord, I ... my work is here, the books ...”

“... will be here when you return to us.”

Sam put a hand to his throat. “My lord, the Citadel ... they make you cut up corpses there. I cannot wear a chain.”

“You can. You will. Maester Aemon is old and blind. His strength is leaving him. Who will take his place when he dies? Maester Mullin at the Shadow Tower is more fighter than scholar, and Maester Harmune of Eastwatch is drunk more than he’s sober.”

“If you ask the Citadel for more maesters ...”

“I mean to. We’ll have need of every one. Aemon Targaryen is not so easily replaced, however.” *This is not going as I had hoped.* He had known Gilly would be hard, but he had assumed Sam would be glad to trade the dangers of the Wall for the warmth of Oldtown. “I was certain this would please you,” he said, puzzled. “There are so many books at the Citadel that no man can hope to read them all. You would do well there, Sam. I know you would.”

“No. I could read the books, but ... a m-maester must be a healer and b-b-blood makes me faint.” His hand shook, to prove the truth of that. “I’m Sam the Scared, not Sam the Slayer.”

“Scared? Of what? The chidings of old men? Sam, you saw the wights come swarming up the Fist, a tide of living dead men with black hands and bright blue eyes. You slew an Other.”

“It was the d-d-d-dragonglass, not me.”

“Be quiet,” Jon snapped. After Gilly, he had no patience for the fat boy’s fears. “You lied and schemed and plotted to make me lord commander. You *will* obey me. You’ll go to the Citadel and forge a chain, and if you have to cut up corpses, so be it. At least in Oldtown the corpses won’t object.”

“My lord, my f-f-f-father, Lord Randyll, he, he, he, he, he ... the life of a maester is a life of *servitude*. No son of House Tarly will ever wear a chain. The men of Horn Hill do not bow and scrape to petty lords. Jon, I cannot disobey my *father*.”

Kill the boy, Jon thought. The boy in you, and the one in him. Kill the both of them, you bloody bastard. “You have no father. Only brothers. Only us. Your life belongs to the Night’s Watch, so go and stuff your small-clothes

into a sack, along with anything else you care to take to Oldtown. You leave an hour before sunrise. And here's another order. From this day forth, you will *not* call yourself a craven. You've faced more things this past year than most men face in a lifetime. You can face the Citadel, but you'll face it as a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch. I can't command you to be brave, but I *can* command you to hide your fears. You said the words, Sam. Remember?"

"I ... I'll try."

"You won't try. You will obey."

"*Obey.*" Mormont's raven flapped its great black wings.

Sam seemed to sag. "As my lord commands. Does ... does Maester Aemon know?"

"It was as much his idea as mine." Jon opened the door for him. "No farewells. The fewer folk who know of this, the better. An hour before first light, by the lichyard."

Sam fled from him just as Gilly had.

Jon was tired. *I need sleep.* He had been up half the night poring over maps, writing letters, and making plans with Maester Aemon. Even after stumbling into his narrow bed, rest had not come easily. He knew what he would face today, and found himself tossing restlessly as he brooded on Maester Aemon's final words. "Allow me to give my lord one last piece of counsel," the old man had said, "the same counsel that I once gave my brother when we parted for the last time. He was three-and-thirty when the Great Council chose him to mount the Iron Throne. A man grown with sons of his own, yet in some ways still a boy. Egg had an innocence to him, a sweetness we all loved. *Kill the boy within you*, I told him the day I took ship for the Wall. *It takes a man to rule. An Aegon, not an Egg. Kill the boy and let the man be born.*" The old man felt Jon's face. "You are half the age that Egg was, and your own burden is a crueller one, I fear. You will have little joy of your command, but I think you have the strength in you to do

the things that must be done. Kill the boy, Jon Snow. Winter is almost upon us. Kill the boy and let the man be born.”

Jon donned his cloak and strode outside. He made the rounds of Castle Black each day, visiting the men on watch and hearing their reports first hand, watching Ulmer and his charges at the archery butts, talking with king’s men and queen’s men alike, walking the ice atop the Wall to have a look at the forest. Ghost padded after him, a white shadow at his side.

Kedge Whiteye had the Wall when Jon made his ascent. Kedge had seen forty-odd namedays, thirty of them on the Wall. His left eye was blind, his right eye mean. In the wild, alone with axe and garron, he was as good a ranger as any in the Watch, but he had never gotten on well with the other men. “A quiet day,” he told Jon. “Nothing to report, except the wrong-way rangers.”

“The wrong-way rangers?” Jon asked.

Kedge grinned. “A pair of knights. Went riding off an hour ago, south along the kingsroad. When Dywen saw them buggering off, he said the southron fools were riding the wrong way.”

“I see,” said Jon.

He found out more from Dywen himself, as the old forester sucked down a bowl of barley broth in the barracks. “Aye, m’lord, I saw them. Horpe and Massey, it were. Claimed Stannis sent ’em out, but never said where or what for or when they would be back.”

Ser Richard Horpe and Ser Justin Massey were both queen’s men, and high in the king’s councils. *A pair of common freeriders would have served if all that Stannis had in mind was scouting*, Jon Snow reflected, *but knights are better suited to act as messengers or envoys*. Cotter Pyke had sent word from Eastwatch that the Onion Lord and Salladhor Saan had set sail for White Harbor to treat with Lord Manderly. It made sense that Stannis would send out other envoys. His Grace was not a patient man.

Whether the wrong-way rangers would return was another question. Knights they might be, but they did not know the north. *There will be eyes along the kingsroad, not all of them friendly.* It was none of Jon's concern, though. *Let Stannis have his secrets. The gods know that I have mine.*

Ghost slept at the foot of the bed that night, and for once Jon did not dream he was a wolf. Even so, he slept fitfully, tossing for hours before sliding down into a nightmare. Gilly was in it, weeping, pleading with him to leave her babes alone, but he ripped the children from her arms and hacked their heads off, then swapped the heads around and told her to sew them back in place.

When he woke, he found Edd Tollett looming over him in the darkness of his bedchamber. "M'lord? It is time. The hour of the wolf. You left orders to be woken."

"Bring me something hot." Jon threw off his blankets.

Edd was back by the time that he had dressed, pressing a steaming cup into his hands. Jon expected hot mulled wine, and was surprised to find that it was soup, a thin broth that smelled of leeks and carrots but seemed to have no leeks or carrots in it. *The smells are stronger in my wolf dreams,* he reflected, *and food tastes richer too. Ghost is more alive than I am.* He left the empty cup upon the forge.

Kegs was on his door this morning. "I will want to speak with Bedwyck and with Janos Slynt," Jon told him. "Have them both here at first light."

Outside the world was black and still. *Cold, but not dangerously cold. Not yet. It will be warmer when the sun comes up. If the gods are good, the Wall may weep.* When they reached the lichyard, the column had already formed up. Jon had given Black Jack Bulwer command of the escort, with a dozen mounted rangers under him, and two wayns. One was piled high with chests and crates and sacks, provisions for the journey. The other had a stiff roof of boiled leather to keep the wind off. Maester Aemon was seated in the back of it, huddled in a bearskin that made him look as small as a child. Sam and Gilly stood nearby. Her eyes were red and puffy, but the boy was in her arms, bundled tight. Whether it was her boy or Dalla's he could not be sure.

He had only seen the two together a few times. Gilly's boy was older, Dalla's more robust, but they were close enough in age and size so that no one who did not know them well would be able to easily tell one from the other.

"Lord Snow," Maester Aemon called out, "I left a book for you in my chambers. The *Jade Compendium*. It was written by the Volantene adventurer Colloquo Votar, who traveled to the east and visited all the lands of the Jade Sea. There is a passage you may find of interest. I've told Clydas to mark it for you."

"I'll be sure to read it."

Maester Aemon wiped his nose. "Knowledge is a weapon, Jon. Arm yourself well before you ride forth to battle."

"I will." Jon felt something wet and cold upon his face. When he raised his eyes, he saw that it was snowing. *A bad omen*. He turned to Black Jack Bulwer. "Make as good a time as you can, but take no foolish risks. You have an old man and a suckling babe with you. See that you keep them warm and well fed."

"You do the same, m'lord." Gilly did not seem in any haste to climb into the wayn. "You do the same for t'other. Find another wet nurse, like you said. You promised me you would. The boy ... Dalla's boy ... the little prince, I mean ... you find him some good woman, so he grows up big and strong."

"You have my word."

"Don't you name him. Don't you do that, till he's past two years. It's ill luck to name them when they're still on the breast. You crows may not know that, but it's true."

"As you command, my lady."

"Don't you call me that. I'm a mother, not a lady. I'm Craster's wife and Craster's daughter, and a *mother*." She gave the babe to Dolorous Edd as she climbed into the wayn and covered herself with furs. When Edd gave

her back the child, Gilly put him to her breast. Sam turned away from the sight, red-faced, and heaved himself up onto his mare. “*Let’s do this,*” commanded Black Jack Bulwer, snapping his whip. The wayns rolled forward.

Sam lingered a moment. “Well,” he said, “farewell.”

“And to you, Sam,” said Dolorous Edd. “Your boat’s not like to sink, I don’t think. Boats only sink when I’m aboard.”

Jon was remembering. “The first time I saw Gilly she was pressed back against the wall of Craster’s Keep, this skinny darkhaired girl with her big belly, cringing away from Ghost. He had gotten in among her rabbits, and I think she was frightened that he would tear her open and devour the babe ... but it was not the wolf she should have been afraid of, was it?”

“She has more courage than she knows,” said Sam. “So do you, Sam. Have a swift, safe voyage, and take care of her and Aemon and the child.” The cold trickles on his face reminded Jon of the day he’d bid farewell to Robb at Winterfell, never knowing that it was for the last time. “And pull your hood up. The snowflakes are melting in your hair.”

By the time the little column had dwindled in the distance, the eastern sky had gone from black to grey and the snow was falling heavily. “Giant will be waiting on the lord commander’s pleasure,” Dolorous Edd reminded him. “Janos Slynt as well.”

“Yes.” Jon Snow glanced up at the Wall, towering over them like a cliff of ice. *A hundred leagues from end to end, and seven hundred feet high.* The strength of the Wall was its height; the length of the Wall was its weakness. Jon remembered something his father had said once. *A wall is only as strong as the men who stand behind it.* The men of the Night’s Watch were brave enough, but they were far too few for the task that confronted them.

Giant was waiting in the armory. His real name was Bedwyck. At a hair and a half over five feet he was the smallest man in the Night’s Watch. Jon came directly to the point. “We need more eyes along the Wall. Way-castles

where our patrols can get out of the cold and find hot food and a fresh mount. I am putting a garrison in Icemark and giving you command of it.”

Giant put the tip of his little finger in his ear to clean out the wax.

“Command? Me? M’lord knows I’m just a crofter’s get, on the Wall for poaching?”

“You’ve been a ranger for a dozen years. You survived the Fist of the First Men and Craster’s Keep, and came back to tell the tale. The younger men look up to you.”

The small man laughed. “Only dwarfs look up to me. I don’t read, my lord. On a good day I can write my name.”

“I’ve sent to Oldtown for more maesters. You’ll have two ravens for when your need is urgent. When it’s not, send riders. Until we have more maesters and more birds, I mean to establish a line of beacon towers along the top of the Wall.”

“And how many poor fools will I be commanding?”

“Twenty, from the Watch,” said Jon, “and half as many men from Stannis.” *Old, green, or wounded.* “They won’t be his best men, and none will take the black, but they’ll obey. Make what use of them you can. Four of the brothers I’m sending with you will be Kingslanders who came to the Wall with Lord Slynt. Keep one eye on that lot and watch for climbers with the other.”

“We can watch, m’lord, but if enough climbers gain the top o’ the Wall, thirty men won’t be enough to throw them off.”

Three hundred might not be enough. Jon kept that doubt to himself. It was true that climbers were desperately vulnerable whilst on the ascent. Stones and spears and pots of burning pitch could be rained down on them from above, and all they could do was cling desperately to the ice. Sometimes the Wall itself seemed to shake them off, as a dog might shake off fleas. Jon had seen that for himself, when a sheet of ice cracked beneath Val’s lover Jarl, sending him to his death.

If the climbers reached the top of the Wall undetected, however, everything changed. Given time, they could carve out a toehold for themselves up there, throwing up ramparts of their own and dropping ropes and ladders for thousands more to clamber over after them. That was how Raymun Redbeard had done it, Raymun who had been King-Beyond-the-Wall in the days of his grandfather's grandfather. Jack Musgood had been the lord commander in those days. Jolly Jack, he was called before Redbeard came down upon the north; Sleepy Jack, forever after. Raymun's host had met a bloody end on the shores of Long Lake, caught between Lord Willam of Winterfell and the Drunken Giant, Harmond Umber. Red-beard had been slain by Artos the Implacable, Lord Willam's younger brother. The Watch arrived too late to fight the wildlings, but in time to bury them, the task that Artos Stark assigned them in his wrath as he grieved above the headless corpse of his fallen brother.

Jon did not intend to be remembered as Sleepy Jon Snow. "Thirty men will stand a better chance than none," he told Giant.

"True enough," the small man said. "Is it just to be Icemark, then, or will m'lord be opening t'other forts as well?"

"I mean to garrison all of them, in time," said Jon, "but for the moment, it will just be Icemark and Greyguard."

"And has m'lord decided who's to command at Greyguard?"

"Janos Slynt," said Jon. *Gods save us.* "A man does not rise to command of the gold cloaks without ability. Slynt was born a butcher's son. He was captain of the Iron Gate when Manly Stokeworth died, and Jon Arryn raised him up and put the defense of King's Landing into his hands. Lord Janos cannot be as great a fool as he seems." *And I want him well away from Alliser Thorne.*

"Might be that's so," said Giant, "but I'd still send him to the kitchens to help Three-Finger Hobb cut up the turnips."

If I did, I'd never dare to eat another turnip.

Half the morning passed before Lord Janos reported as commanded. Jon was cleaning Longclaw. Some men would have given that task to a steward or a squire, but Lord Eddard had taught his sons to care for their own weapons. When Kegs and Dolorous Edd arrived with Slynt, Jon thanked them and bid Lord Janos sit.

That he did, albeit with poor grace, crossing his arms, scowling, and ignoring the naked steel in his lord commander's hands. Jon slid the oilcloth down his bastard sword, watching the play of morning light across the ripples, thinking how easily the blade would slide through skin and fat and sinew to part Slynt's ugly head from his body. All of a man's crimes were wiped away when he took the black, and all of his allegiances as well, yet he found it hard to think of Janos Slynt as a brother. *There is blood between us. This man helped slay my father and did his best to have me killed as well.*

"Lord Janos." Jon sheathed his sword. "I am giving you command of Greyguard."

That took Slynt aback. "Greyguard ... Greyguard was where you climbed the Wall with your wildling friends ..."

"It was. The fort is in a sorry state, admittedly. You will restore it as best you can. Start by clearing back the forest. Steal stones from the structures that have collapsed to repair those still standing." *The work will be hard and brutal*, he might have added. *You'll sleep on stone, too exhausted to complain or plot, and soon you'll forget what it was like to be warm, but you might remember what it was to be a man.* "You will have thirty men. Ten from here, ten from the Shadow Tower, and ten lent to us by King Stannis."

Slynt's face had turned the color of a prune. His meaty jowls began to quiver. "Do you think I cannot see what you are doing? Janos Slynt is not a man to be gulled so easily. I was charged with the defense of King's Landing when you were soiling your swaddling clothes. Keep your ruin, bastard."

I am giving you a chance, my lord. It is more than you ever gave my father.
“You mistake me, my lord,” Jon said. “That was a command, not an offer. It is forty leagues to Greyguard. Pack up your arms and armor, say your farewells, and be ready to depart at first light on the morrow.”

“No.” Lord Janos lurched to his feet, sending his chair crashing over backwards. “I will *not* go meekly off to freeze and die. No traitor’s bastard gives commands to Janos Slynt! I am not without friends, I warn you. Here, and in King’s Landing too. I was the Lord of Harrenhal! Give your ruin to one of the blind fools who cast a stone for you, I will not have it. Do you hear me, boy? *I will not have it!*”

“You will.”

Slynt did not deign to answer that, but he kicked the chair aside as he departed.

He still sees me as a boy, Jon thought, a green boy, to be cowed by angry words. He could only hope that a night’s sleep would bring Lord Janos to his senses.

The next morning proved that hope was vain.

Jon found Slynt breaking his fast in the common room. Ser Alliser Thorne was with him, and several of their cronies. They were laughing about something when Jon came down the steps with Iron Emmett and Dolorous Edd, and behind them Mully, Horse, Red Jack Crabb, Rusty Flowers, and Owen the Oaf. Three-Finger Hobb was ladling out porridge from his kettle. Queen’s men, king’s men, and black brothers sat at their separate tables, some bent over bowls of porridge, others filling their bellies with fried bread and bacon. Jon saw Pyp and Grenn at one table, Bowen Marsh at another. The air smelled of smoke and grease, and the clatter of knives and spoons echoed off the vaulted ceiling.

All the voices died at once. “Lord Janos,” Jon said, “I will give you one last chance. Put down that spoon and get to the stables. I have had your horse saddled and bridled. It is a long, hard road to Greyguard.”

“Then you had best be on your way, boy.” Slynt laughed, dribbling porridge down his chest. “Greyguard’s a good place for the likes of you, I’m thinking. Well away from decent godly folk. The mark of the beast is on you, bastard.”

“You are refusing to obey my order?”

“You can stick your order up your bastard’s arse,” said Slynt, his jowls quivering.

Alliser Thorne smiled a thin smile, his black eyes fixed on Jon. At another table, Godry the Giantslayer began to laugh.

“As you will.” Jon nodded to Iron Emmett. “Please take Lord Janos to the Wall—”

—and confine him to an ice cell, he might have said. A day or ten cramped up inside the ice would leave him shivering and feverish and begging for release, Jon did not doubt. And the moment he is out, he and Thorne will begin to plot again.

—and tie him to his horse, he might have said. If Slynt did not wish to go to Greyguard as its commander, he could go as its cook. It will only be a matter of time until he deserts, then. And how many others will he take with him?

“—and hang him,” Jon finished.

Janos Slynt’s face went as white as milk. The spoon slipped from his fingers. Edd and Emmett crossed the room, their footsteps ringing on the stone floor. Bowen Marsh’s mouth opened and closed though no words came out. Ser Alliser Thorne reached for his sword hilt. *Go on, Jon thought. Longclaw was slung across his back. Show your steel. Give me cause to do the same.*

Half the men in the hall were on their feet. Southron knights and men-at-arms, loyal to King Stannis or the red woman or both, and Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch. Some had chosen Jon to be their lord commander.

Others had cast their stones for Bowen Marsh, Ser Denys Mal-lister, Cotter Pyke ... and some for Janos Slynt. *Hundreds of them, as I recall.* Jon wondered how many of those men were in the cellar right now. For a moment the world balanced on a sword's edge.

Alliser Thorne took his hand from his sword and stepped aside to let Edd Tollett pass.

Dolorous Edd took hold of Slynt by one arm, Iron Emmett by the other. Together they hauled him from the bench. "No," Lord Janos protested, flecks of porridge spraying from his lips. "No, unhand me. He's just a boy, a *bastard*. His father was a traitor. The mark of the beast is on him, that wolf of his ... *Let go of me!* You will rue the day you laid hands on Janos Slynt. I have friends in King's Landing. I warn you—" He was still protesting as they half-marched, half-dragged him up the steps.

Jon followed them outside. Behind him, the cellar emptied. At the cage, Slynt wrenched loose for a moment and tried to make a fight of it, but Iron Emmett caught him by the throat and slammed him back against the iron bars until he desisted. By then all of Castle Black had come outside to watch. Even Val was at her window, her long golden braid across one shoulder. Stannis stood on the steps of the King's Tower, surrounded by his knights.

"If the boy thinks that he can frighten me, he is mistaken," they heard Lord Janos said. "He would not dare to hang me. Janos Slynt has friends, *important* friends, you'll see ..." The wind whipped away the rest of his words.

This is wrong, Jon thought. "Stop."

Emmett turned back, frowning. "My lord?"

"I will not hang him," said Jon. "Bring him here."

"Oh, Seven save us," he heard Bowen Marsh cry out.

The smile that Lord Janos Slynt smiled then had all the sweetness of rancid butter. Until Jon said, “Edd, fetch me a block,” and unsheathed Longclaw.

By the time a suitable chopping block was found, Lord Janos had retreated into the winch cage, but Iron Emmett went in after him and dragged him out. “No,” Slynt cried, as Emmett half-shoved and half-pulled him across the yard. “Unhand me ... you cannot ... when Tywin Lannister hears of this, you will all rue—”

Emmett kicked his legs out from under him. Dolorous Edd planted a foot on his back to keep him on his knees as Emmett shoved the block beneath his head. “This will go easier if you stay still,” Jon Snow promised him. “Move to avoid the cut, and you will still die, but your dying will be uglier. Stretch out your neck, my lord.” The pale morning sunlight ran up and down his blade as Jon clasped the hilt of the bastard sword with both hands and raised it high. “If you have any last words, now is the time to speak them,” he said, expecting one last curse.

Janos Slynt twisted his neck around to stare up at him. “Please, my lord. Mercy. I’ll ... I’ll go, I will, I ...”

No, thought Jon. *You closed that door*. Longclaw descended. “Can I have his boots?” asked Owen the Oaf, as Janos Slynt’s head went rolling across the muddy ground. “They’re almost new, those boots. Lined with fur.”

Jon glanced back at Stannis. For an instant their eyes met. Then the king nodded and went back inside his tower.