

JON

That night he dreamt of wildlings howling from the woods, advancing to the moan of warhorns and the roll of drums. *Boom DOOM boom DOOM boom DOOM* came the sound, a thousand hearts with a single beat. Some had spears and some had bows and some had axes. Others rode on chariots made of bones, drawn by teams of dogs as big as ponies. Giants lumbered amongst them, forty feet tall, with mauls the size of oak trees.

“Stand fast,” Jon Snow called. “Throw them back.” He stood atop the Wall, alone. “Flame,” he cried, “feed them flame,” but there was no one to pay heed.

They are all gone. They have abandoned me.

Burning shafts hissed upward, trailing tongues of fire. Scarecrow brothers tumbled down, black cloaks ablaze. “*Snow*,” an eagle cried, as foemen scuttled up the ice like spiders. Jon was armored in black ice, but his blade burned red in his fist. As the dead men reached the top of the Wall he sent them down to die again. He slew a greybeard and a beardless boy, a giant, a gaunt man with filed teeth, a girl with thick red hair. Too late he recognized Ygritte. She was gone as quick as she’d appeared.

The world dissolved into a red mist. Jon stabbed and slashed and cut. He hacked down Donal Noye and gutted Deaf Dick Follard. Qhorin Halfhand stumbled to his knees, trying in vain to staunch the flow of blood from his neck. “*I am the Lord of Winterfell*,” Jon screamed. It was Robb before him now, his hair wet with melting snow. Longclaw took his head off. Then a gnarled hand seized Jon roughly by the shoulder. He whirled ...

... and woke with a raven pecking at his chest. “*Snow*,” the bird cried. Jon swatted at it. The raven shrieked its displeasure and flapped up to a bedpost to glare down balefully at him through the predawn gloom.

The day had come. It was the hour of the wolf. Soon enough the sun would rise, and four thousand wildlings would come pouring through the Wall.

Madness. Jon Snow ran his burned hand through his hair and wondered once again what he was doing. Once the gate was opened there would be no turning back. *It should have been the Old Bear to treat with Tormund. It should have been Jaremy Rykker or Qhorin Halfhand or Denys Mallister or some other seasoned man. It should have been my uncle.* It was too late for such misgivings, though. Every choice had its risks, every choice its consequences. He would play the game to its conclusion.

He rose and dressed in darkness, as Mormont's raven muttered across the room. "*Corn,*" the bird said, and, "*King,*" and, "*Snow, Jon Snow, Jon Snow.*" That was queer. The bird had never said his full name before, as best Jon could recall.

He broke his fast in the cellar with his officers. Fried bread, fried eggs, blood sausages, and barley porridge made up the meal, washed down with thin yellow beer. As they ate they went over the preparations yet again. "All is in readiness," Bowen Marsh assured him. "If the wildlings uphold the terms of the bargain, all will go as you've commanded."

And if not, it may turn to blood and carnage. "Remember," Jon said, "Tormund's people are hungry, cold, and fearful. Some of them hate us as much as some of you hate them. We are dancing on rotten ice here, them and us. One crack, and we all drown. If blood should be shed today, it had best not be one of us who strikes the first blow, or I swear by the old gods and the new that I will have the head of the man who strikes it."

They answered him with ayes and nods and muttered words, with "As you command," and "It will be done," and "Yes, my lord." And one by one they rose and buckled on their swords and donned their warm black cloaks and strode out into the cold.

Last to leave the table was Dolorous Edd Tollett, who had come in during the night with six wagons from the Long Barrow. Whore's Barrow, the black brothers called the fortress now. Edd had been sent to gather up as many spearwives as his wagons would hold and bring them back to join their sisters.

Jon watched him mop up a runny yolk with a chunk of bread. It was strangely comforting to see Edd's dour face again. "How goes the restoration work?" he asked his old steward.

"Ten more years should do it," Tollett replied in his usual gloomy tone. "Place was overrun with rats when we moved in. The spearwives killed the nasty buggers. Now the place is overrun with spearwives. There's days I want the rats back."

"How do you find serving under Iron Emmett?" Jon asked. "Mostly it's Black Maris serving under him, m'lord. Me, I have the mules. Nettles claims we're kin. It's true we have the same long face, but I'm not near as stubborn. Anyway I never knew their mothers, on my honor." He finished the last of his eggs and sighed. "I do like me a nice runny egg. If it please m'lord, don't let the wildlings eat all our chickens."

Out in the yard, the eastern sky had just begun to lighten. There was not a wisp of cloud in sight. "We have a good day for this, it would seem," Jon said. "A bright day, warm and sunny."

"The Wall will weep. And winter almost on us. It's unnatural, m'lord. A bad sign, you ask me."

Jon smiled. "And if it were to snow?"

"A worse sign."

"What sort of weather would you prefer?"

"The sort they keep indoors," said Dolorous Edd. "If it please m'lord, I should get back to my mules. They miss me when I'm gone. More than I can say for them spearwives."

They parted there, Tollett for the east road, where his wagons waited, Jon Snow for the stables. Satin had his horse saddled and bridled and waiting for him, a fiery grey courser with a mane as black and shiny as maester's ink. He was not the sort of mount that Jon would have chosen for a ranging,

but on this morning all that mattered was that he look impressive, and for that the stallion was a perfect choice.

His tail was waiting too. Jon had never liked surrounding himself with guards, but today it seemed prudent to keep a few good men beside him. They made a grim display in their ringmail, iron halfhelms, and black cloaks, with tall spears in their hands and swords and daggers on their belts. For this Jon had passed over all the green boys and greybeards in his command, choosing eight men in their prime: Ty and Mully, Left Hand Lew, Big Liddle, Rory, Fulk the Flea, Garrett Greenspear. And Leathers, Castle Black's new master-at-arms, to show the free folk that even a man who had fought for Mance in the battle beneath the Wall could find a place of honor in the Night's Watch.

A deep red blush had appeared in the east by the time they all assembled at the gate. *The stars are going out*, Jon thought. When next they reappeared, they would be shining down upon a world forever changed. A few queen's men stood watching from beside the embers of Lady Melisandre's nightfire. When Jon glanced at the King's Tower, he glimpsed a flash of red behind a window. Of Queen Selyse he saw no sign.

It was time. "Open the gate," Jon Snow said softly.

"*OPEN THE GATE!*" Big Liddle roared. His voice was thunder. Seven hundred feet above, the sentries heard and raised their warhorns to their lips. The sound rang out, echoing off the Wall and out across the world. *Ahhooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo*. One long blast. For a thousand years or more, that sound had meant rangers coming home. Today it meant something else. Today it called the free folk to their new homes.

On either end of the long tunnel, gates swung open and iron bars unlocked. Dawn light shimmered on the ice above, pink and gold and purple. Dolorous Edd had not been wrong. The Wall would soon be weeping. *Gods grant it weeps alone*.

Satin led them underneath the ice, lighting the way through the gloom of the tunnel with an iron lantern. Jon followed, leading his horse. Then his guardsmen. After them came Bowen Marsh and his stewards, a score of

them, every man assigned a task. Above, Ulmer of the Kingswood had the Wall. Two score of Castle Black's best bowmen stood with him, ready to respond to any trouble down below with a rain of arrows.

North of the Wall, Tormund Giantsbane was waiting, mounted on a runty little garron that looked far too weedy to support his weight. His two remaining sons were with him, tall Toregg and young Dryn, along with three score warriors.

"*Har!*" Tormund called. "Guards, is it? Now where's the trust in that, crow?"

"You brought more men than I did."

"So I did. Come here by me, lad. I want my folk to see you. I got thousands ne'er saw a lord commander, grown men who were told as boys that your rangers would eat them if they didn't behave. They need to see you plain, a long-faced lad in an old black cloak. They need to learn that the Night's Watch is naught t'be feared."

That is a lesson I would sooner they never learned. Jon peeled the glove off his burned hand, put two fingers in his mouth, and whistled. Ghost came racing from the gate. Tormund's horse shied so hard that the wild-ling almost lost his saddle. "Naught to be feared?" Jon said. "Ghost, stay."

"You are a black-hearted bastard, Lord Crow." Tormund Horn-Blower lifted his own warhorn to his lips. The sound of it echoed off the ice like rolling thunder, and the first of the free folk began to stream toward the gate.

From dawn till dusk Jon watched the wildlings pass.

The hostages went first—one hundred boys between the ages of eight and sixteen. "Your blood price, Lord Crow," Tormund declared. "I hope the wailing o' their poor mothers don't haunt your dreams at night." Some of the boys were led to the gate by a mother or a father, others by older siblings. More came alone. Fourteen and fifteen-year-old boys were almost men, and did not want to be seen clinging to a woman's skirts.

Two stewards counted the boys as they went by, noting each name on long sheepskin scrolls. A third collected their valuables for the toll and wrote that down as well. The boys were going to a place that none had ever been before, to serve an order that had been the enemy of their kith and kin for thousands of years, yet Jon saw no tears, heard no wailing mothers. *These are winter's people*, he reminded himself. *Tears freeze upon your cheeks where they come from.* Not a single hostage balked or tried to slink away when his turn came to enter that gloomy tunnel.

Almost all the boys were thin, some past the point of gauntness, with spindly shanks and arms like twigs. That was no more than Jon expected. Elsewise they came in every shape and size and color. He saw tall boys and short boys, brown-haired boys and black-haired boys, honey blonds and strawberry blonds and redheads kissed by fire, like Ygritte. He saw boys with scars, boys with limps, boys with pockmarked faces. Many of the older boys had downy cheeks or wispy little mustachios, but there was one fellow with a beard as thick as Tormund's. Some dressed in fine soft furs, some in boiled leather and oddments of armor, more in wool and seal-skins, a few in rags. One was naked. Many had weapons: sharpened spears, stone-headed mauls, knives made of bone or stone or dragonglass, spiked clubs, tanglenets, even here and there a rust-eaten old sword. The Hornfoot boys walked blithe and barefoot through the snowdrifts. Other lads had bear-paws on their boots and walked on top of the same drifts, never sinking through the crust. Six boys arrived on horses, two on mules. A pair of brothers turned up with a goat. The biggest hostage was six-and-a-half feet tall but had a baby's face; the smallest was a runty boy who claimed nine years but looked no more than six.

Of special note were the sons of men of renown. Tormund took care to point them out as they went by. "The boy there is the son of Soren Shieldbreaker," he said of one tall lad. "Him with the red hair, he's Gerrick Kingsblood's get. Comes o' the line o' Raymun Redbeard, to hear him tell it. The line o' Redbeard's little brother, you want it true." Two boys looked enough alike to be twins, but Tormund insisted they were cousins, born a year apart. "One was sired by Harle the Huntsman, t'other by Harle the Handsome, both on the same woman. Fathers hate each other. I was you, I'd send one to Eastwatch and t'other to your Shadow Tower."

Other hostages were named as sons of Howd Wanderer, of Brogg, of Devyn Sealskinner, Kyleg of the Wooden Ear, Morna White Mask, the Great Walrus ...

“The Great Walrus? Truly?”

“They have queer names along the Frozen Shore.”

Three hostages were sons of Alfyn Crowkiller, an infamous raider slain by Qhorin Halfhand. Or so Tormund insisted. “They do not look like brothers,” Jon observed.

“Half-brothers, born o’ different mothers. Alfyn’s member was a wee thing, even smaller than yours, but he was never shy with where he stuck it. Had a son in every village, that one.”

Of a certain runty rat-faced boy, Tormund said, “That one’s a whelp of Varamyr Sixskins. You remember Varamyr, Lord Crow?”

He did. “The skinchanger.”

“Aye, he was that. A vicious little runt besides. Dead now, like as not. No one’s seen him since the battle.”

Two of the boys were girls in disguise. When Jon saw them, he dispatched Rory and Big Liddle to bring them to him. One came meekly enough, the other kicking and biting. *This could end badly.* “Do these two have famous fathers?”

“Har! Them skinny things? Not likely. Picked by lot.”

“They’re girls.”

“Are they?” Tormund squinted at the pair of them from his saddle. “Me and Lord Crow made a wager on which o’ you has the biggest member. Pull them breeches down, give us a look.”

One of the girls turned red. The other glared defiantly. “You leave us alone, Tormund Giantstink. You let us go.”

“*Har!* You win, crow. Not a cock between ’em. The little one’s got her a set o’ balls, though. A spearwife in the making, her.” He called to his own men. “Go find them something girly to put on before Lord Snow wets his smallclothes.”

“I’ll need two boys to take their places.”

“How’s that?” Tormund scratched his beard. “A hostage is a hostage, seems to me. That big sharp sword o’ yours can snick a girl’s head off as easy as a boy’s. A father loves his daughters too. Well, most fathers.”

It is not their fathers who concern me. “Did Mance ever sing of Brave Danny Flint?”

“Not as I recall. Who was he?”

“A girl who dressed up like a boy to take the black. Her song is sad and pretty. What happened to her wasn’t.” In some versions of the song, her ghost still walked the Nightfort. “I’ll send the girls to Long Barrow.” The only men there were Iron Emmett and Dolorous Edd, both of whom he trusted. That was not something he could say of all his brothers.

The wildling understood. “Nasty birds, you crows.” He spat. “Two more boys, then. You’ll have them.”

When nine-and-ninety hostages had shuffled by them to pass beneath the Wall, Tormund Giantsbane produced the last one. “My son Dryn. You’ll see he’s well taken care of, crow, or I’ll cook your black liver up and eat it.”

Jon gave the boy a close inspection. *Bran’s age, or the age he would have been if Theon had not killed him.* Dryn had none of Bran’s sweetness, though. He was a chunky boy, with short legs, thick arms, and a wide red face—a miniature version of his father, with a shock of dark brown hair. “He’ll serve as my own page,” Jon promised Tormund.

“Hear that, Dryn? See that you don’t get above yourself.” To Jon he said, “He’ll need a good beating from time to time. Be careful o’ his teeth,

though. He bites.” He reached down for his horn again, raised it, and blew another blast.

This time it was warriors who came forward. And not just one hundred of them. *Five hundred*, Jon Snow judged, as they moved out from beneath the trees, *perhaps as many as a thousand*. One in every ten of them came mounted but all of them came armed. Across their backs they bore round wicker shields covered with hides and boiled leather, displaying painted images of snakes and spiders, severed heads, bloody hammers, broken skulls, and demons. A few were clad in stolen steel, dented oddments of armor looted from the corpses of fallen rangers. Others had armored themselves in bones, like Rattleshirt. All wore fur and leather.

There were spearwives with them, long hair streaming. Jon could not look at them without remembering Ygritte: the gleam of fire in her hair, the look on her face when she’d disrobed for him in the grotto, the sound of her voice. “You know nothing, Jon Snow,” she’d told him a hundred times.

It is as true now as it was then. “You might have sent the women first,” he said to Tormund. “The mothers and the maids.”

The wildling gave him a shrewd look. “Aye, I might have. And you crows might decide to close that gate. A few fighters on t’other side, well, that way the gate stays open, don’t it?” He grinned. “I bought your bloody horse, Jon Snow. Don’t mean that we can’t count his teeth. Now don’t you go thinking me and mine don’t trust you. We trust you just as much as you trust us.” He snorted. “You wanted warriors, didn’t you? Well, there they are. Every one worth six o’ your black crows.”

Jon had to smile. “So long as they save those weapons for our common foe, I am content.”

“Gave you my word on it, didn’t I? The word of Tormund Giantsbane. Strong as iron, ’tis.” He turned and spat.

Amongst the stream of warriors were the fathers of many of Jon’s hostages. Some stared with cold dead eyes as they went by, fingering their sword hilts. Others smiled at him like long-lost kin, though a few of those smiles

discomfited Jon Snow more than any glare. None knelt, but many gave him their oaths. “What Tormund swore, I swear,” declared black-haired Brogg, a man of few words. Soren Shieldbreaker bowed his head an inch and growled, “Soren’s axe is yours, Jon Snow, if ever you have need of such.” Red-bearded Gerrick Kingsblood brought three daughters. “They will make fine wives, and give their husbands strong sons of royal blood,” he boasted. “Like their father, they are descended from Raymun Redbeard, who was King-Beyond-the-Wall.”

Blood meant little and less amongst the free folk, Jon knew. Ygritte had taught him that. Gerrick’s daughters shared her same flame-red hair, though hers had been a tangle of curls and theirs hung long and straight. *Kissed by fire*. “Three princesses, each lovelier than the last,” he told their father. “I will see that they are presented to the queen.” Selyse Baratheon would take to these three better than she had to Val, he suspected; they were younger and considerably more cowed. *Sweet enough to look at them, though their father seems a fool*.

Howd Wanderer swore his oath upon his sword, as nicked and pitted a piece of iron as Jon had ever seen. Devyn Sealskinner presented him with a sealskin hat, Harle the Huntsman with a bear-claw necklace. The warrior witch Morna removed her weirwood mask just long enough to kiss his gloved hand and swear to be his man or his woman, whichever he preferred. And on and on and on.

As they passed, each warrior stripped off his treasures and tossed them into one of the carts that the stewards had placed before the gate. Amber pendants, golden torques, jeweled daggers, silver brooches set with gemstones, bracelets, rings, niello cups and golden goblets, warhorns and drinking horns, a green jade comb, a necklace of freshwater pearls ... all yielded up and noted down by Bowen Marsh. One man surrendered a shirt of silver scales that had surely been made for some great lord. Another produced a broken sword with three sapphires in the hilt.

And there were queerer things: a toy mammoth made of actual mammoth hair, an ivory phallus, a helm made from a unicorn’s head, complete with horn. How much food such things would buy in the Free Cities, Jon Snow could not begin to say.

After the riders came the men of the Frozen Shore. Jon watched a dozen of their big bone chariots roll past him one by one, clattering like Rattleshirt. Half still rolled as before; others had replaced their wheels with runners. They slid across the snowdrifts smoothly, where the wheeled chariots were foundering and sinking.

The dogs that drew the chariots were fearsome beasts, as big as direwolves. Their women were clad in sealskins, some with infants at their breasts. Older children shuffled along behind their mothers and looked up at Jon with eyes as dark and hard as the stones they clutched. Some of the men wore antlers on their hats, and some wore walrus tusks. The two sorts did not love each other, he soon gathered. A few thin reindeer brought up the rear, with the great dogs snapping at the heels of stragglers.

“Be wary o’ that lot, Jon Snow,” Tormund warned him. “A savage folk. The men are bad, the women worse.” He took a skin off his saddle and offered it up to Jon. “Here. This will make them seem less fearsome, might be. And warm you for the night. No, go on, it’s yours to keep. Drink deep.”

Within was a mead so potent it made Jon’s eyes water and sent tendrils of fire snaking through his chest. He drank deep. “You’re a good man, Tormund Giantsbane. For a wildling.”

“Better than most, might be. Not so good as some.”

On and on the wildlings came, as the sun crept across the bright blue sky. Just before midday, the movement stopped when an oxcart became jammed at a turn inside the tunnel. Jon Snow went to have a look for himself. The cart was now wedged solid. The men behind were threatening to hack it apart and butcher the ox where he stood, whilst the driver and his kin swore to kill them if they tried. With the help of Tormund and his son Toregg, Jon managed to keep the wildlings from coming to blood, but it took the best part of an hour before the way was opened again.

“You need a bigger gate,” Tormund complained to Jon with a sour look up at the sky, where a few clouds had blown in. “Too bloody slow this way. Like sucking the Milkwater through a reed. *Har*. Would that I had the Horn of Joramun. I’d give it a nice toot and we’d climb through the rubble.”

“Melisandre burned the Horn of Joramun.”

“Did she?” Tormund slapped his thigh and hooted. “She burned that fine big horn, aye. A bloody sin, I call it. A thousand years old, that was. We found it in a giant’s grave, and no man o’ us had ever seen a horn so big. That must have been why Mance got the notion to tell you it were Joramun’s. He wanted you crows to think he had it in his power to blow your bloody Wall down about your knees. But we never found the true horn, not for all our digging. If we had, every kneeler in your Seven Kingdoms would have chunks o’ ice to cool his wine all summer.”

Jon turned in his saddle, frowning. *And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter and woke giants from the earth.* That huge horn with its bands of old gold, incised with ancient runes ... had Mance Rayder lied to him, or was Tormund lying now? *If Mance’s horn was just a feint, where is the true horn?*

By afternoon the sun had gone, and the day turned grey and gusty. “A snow sky,” Tormund announced grimly.

Others had seen the same omen in those flat white clouds. It seemed to spur them on to haste. Tempers began to fray. One man was stabbed when he tried to slip in ahead of others who had been hours in the column. Toregg wrenched the knife away from his attacker, dragged both men from the press, and sent them back to the wildling camp to start again.

“Tormund,” Jon said, as they watched four old women pull a cartful of children toward the gate, “tell me of our foe. I would know all there is to know of the Others.”

The wildling rubbed his mouth. “Not here,” he mumbled, “not this side o’ your Wall.” The old man glanced uneasily toward the trees in their white mantles. “They’re never far, you know. They won’t come out by day, not when that old sun’s shining, but don’t think that means they went away. Shadows never go away. Might be you don’t see them, but they’re always clinging to your heels.”

“Did they trouble you on your way south?”

“They never came in force, if that’s your meaning, but they were with us all the same, nibbling at our edges. We lost more outriders than I care to think about, and it was worth your life to fall behind or wander off. Every nightfall we’d ring our camps with fire. They don’t like fire much, and no mistake. When the snows came, though ... snow and sleet and freezing rain, it’s bloody hard to find dry wood or get your kindling lit, and the *cold* ... some nights our fires just seemed to shrivel up and die. Nights like that, you always find some dead come the morning. ’Less they find you first. The night that Torwynd ... my boy, he ...” Tormund turned his face away.

“I know,” said Jon Snow.

Tormund turned back. “You know nothing. You killed a dead man, aye, I heard. Mance killed a hundred. A man can fight the dead, but when their masters come, when the white mists rise up ... how do you fight a *mist*, crow? Shadows with teeth ... air so cold it hurts to breathe, like a knife inside your chest ... you do not know, you cannot know ... can your sword cut *cold*?”

We will see, Jon thought, remembering the things that Sam had told him, the things he’d found in his old books. Longclaw had been forged in the fires of old Valyria, forged in dragonflame and set with spells. *Dragon-steel*, Sam called it. *Stronger than any common steel, lighter, harder, sharper* ... But words in a book were one thing. The true test came in battle.

“You are not wrong,” Jon said. “I do not know. And if the gods are good, I never will.”

“The gods are seldom good, Jon Snow.” Tormund nodded toward the sky. “The clouds roll in. Already it grows darker, colder. Your Wall no longer weeps. Look.” He turned and called out to his son Toregg. “Ride back to the camp and get them moving. The sick ones and the weak ones, the slugabeds and cravens, get them on their bloody feet. Set their bloody tents afire if you must. The gate must close at nightfall. Any man not through the Wall by then had best pray the Others get to him afore I do. You hear?”

“I hear.” Toregg put his heels into his horse and galloped back down the column.

On and on the wildlings came. The day grew darker, just as Tormund said. Clouds covered the sky from horizon to horizon, and warmth fled. There was more shoving at the gate, as men and goats and bullocks jostled each other out of the way. *It is more than impatience, Jon realized. They are afraid. Warriors, spearwives, raiders, they are frightened of those woods, of shadows moving through the trees. They want to put the Wall between them before the night descends.*

A snowflake danced upon the air. Then another. *Dance with me, Jon Snow*, he thought. *You'll dance with me anon.*

On and on and on the wildlings came. Some were moving faster now, hastening across the battleground. Others—the old, the young, the feeble—could scarce move at all. This morning the field had been covered with a thick blanket of old snow, its white crust shining in the sun. Now the field was brown and black and slimy. The passage of the free folk had turned the ground to mud and muck: wooden wheels and horses' hooves, runners of bone and horn and iron, pig trotters, heavy boots, the cloven feet of cows and bullocks, the bare black feet of the Hornfoot folk, all had left their marks. The soft footing slowed the column even more. "You need a bigger gate," Tormund complained again.

By late afternoon the snow was falling steadily, but the river of wildlings had dwindled to a stream. Columns of smoke rose from the trees where their camp had been. "Toregg," Tormund explained. "Burning the dead. Always some who go to sleep and don't wake up. You find them in their tents, them as have tents, curled up and froze. Toregg knows what to do."

The stream was no more than a trickle by the time Toregg emerged from the wood. With him rode a dozen mounted warriors armed with spears and swords. "My rear guard," Tormund said, with a gap-toothed smile. "You crows have rangers. So do we. Them I left in camp in case we were attacked before we all got out."

"Your best men."

"Or my worst. Every man o' them has killed a crow."

Amongst the riders came one man afoot, with some big beast trotting at his heels. *A boar*, Jon saw. *A monstrous boar*. Twice the size of Ghost, the creature was covered with coarse black hair, with tusks as long as a man's arm. Jon had never seen a boar so huge or ugly. The man beside him was no beauty either; hulking, black-browed, he had a flat nose, heavy jowls dark with stubble, small black close-set eyes.

"Borroq." Tormund turned his head and spat. "A skinchanger." It was not a question. Somehow he knew.

Ghost turned his head. The falling snow had masked the boar's scent, but now the white wolf had the smell. He padded out in front of Jon, his teeth bared in a silent snarl.

"*No!*" Jon snapped. "Ghost, down. Stay. *Stay!*"

"Boars and wolves," said Tormund. "Best keep that beast o' yours locked up tonight. I'll see that Borroq does the same with his pig." He glanced up at the darkening sky. "Them's the last, and none too soon. It's going to snow all night, I feel it. Time I had a look at what's on t'other side of all that ice."

"You go ahead," Jon told him. "I mean to be the last one through the ice. I will join you at the feast."

"Feast? *Har!* Now that's a word I like to hear." The wildling turned his garron toward the Wall and slapped her on the rump. Toregg and the riders followed, dismounting by the gate to lead their horses through. Bowen Marsh stayed long enough to supervise as his stewards pulled the last carts into the tunnel. Only Jon Snow and his guards were left.

The skinchanger stopped ten yards away. His monster pawed at the mud, snuffing. A light powdering of snow covered the boar's humped black back. He gave a snort and lowered his head, and for half a heartbeat Jon thought he was about to charge. To either side of him, his men lowered their spears.

"Brother," Borroq said. "You'd best go on. We are about to close the gate."

“You do that,” Borroq said. “You close it good and tight. They’re coming, crow.” He smiled as ugly a smile as Jon had ever seen and made his way to the gate. The boar stalked after him. The falling snow covered up their tracks behind them.

“That’s done, then,” Rory said when they were gone.

No, thought Jon Snow, it has only just begun.

Bowen Marsh was waiting for him south of the Wall, with a tablet full of numbers. “Three thousand one hundred and nineteen wildlings passed through the gate today,” the Lord Steward told him. “Sixty of your hostages were sent off to Eastwatch and the Shadow Tower after they’d been fed. Edd Tollett took six wagons of women back to Long Barrow. The rest remain with us.”

“Not for long,” Jon promised him. “Tormund means to lead his own folk to Oakenshield within a day or two. The rest will follow, as soon as we sort where to put them.”

“As you say, Lord Snow.” The words were stiff. The tone suggested that Bowen Marsh knew where *he* would put them.

The castle Jon returned to was far different from the one he’d left that morning. For as long as he had known it, Castle Black had been a place of silence and shadows, where a meagre company of men in black moved like ghosts amongst the ruins of a fortress that had once housed ten times their numbers. All that had changed. Lights now shone through windows where Jon Snow had never seen lights shine before. Strange voices echoed down the yards, and free folk were coming and going along icy paths that had only known the black boots of crows for years. Outside the old Flint Barracks, he came across a dozen men pelting one another with snow. *Playing, Jon thought in astonishment, grown men playing like children, throwing snowballs the way Bran and Arya once did, and Robb and me before them.*

Donal Noye’s old armory was still dark and silent, however, and Jon’s rooms back of the cold forge were darker still. But he had no sooner taken

off his cloak than Dannel poked his head through the door to announce that Clydas had brought a message.

“Send him in.” Jon lit a taper from an ember in his brazier and three candles from the taper.

Clydas entered pink and blinking, the parchment clutched in one soft hand. “Beg pardon, Lord Commander. I know you must be weary, but I thought you would want to see this at once.”

“You did well.” Jon read:

From_ Talon, *by hand of Maester Harmune.*

Cotter Pyke had made his angry mark below. “Is it grievous, my lord?” asked Clydas. “Grievous enough.” *Dead things in the wood. Dead things in the water. Six ships left, of the eleven that set sail.* Jon Snow rolled up the parchment, frowning. *Night falls, he thought, and now my war begins.*