

JON

“Othor,” announced Ser Jaremy Rykker, “beyond a doubt. And this one was Jafer Flowers.” He turned the corpse over with his foot, and the dead white face stared up at the overcast sky with blue, blue eyes. “They were Ben Stark’s men, both of them.”

My uncle’s men, Jon thought numbly. He remembered how he’d pleaded to ride with them. *Gods, I was such a green boy. If he had taken me, it might be me lying here...*

Jafer’s right wrist ended in the ruin of torn flesh and splintered bone left by Ghost’s jaws. His right hand was floating in a jar of vinegar back in Maester Aemon’s tower. His left hand, still at the end of his arm, was as black as his cloak.

“Gods have mercy,” the Old Bear muttered. He swung down from his garron, handing his reins to Jon. The morning was unnaturally warm; beads of sweat dotted the Lord Commander’s broad forehead like dew on a melon. His horse was nervous, rolling her eyes, backing away from the dead men as far as her lead would allow. Jon led her off a few paces, fighting to keep her from bolting. The horses did not like the feel of this place. For that matter, neither did Jon.

The dogs liked it least of all. Ghost had led the party here; the pack of hounds had been useless. When Bass the kennelmaster had tried to get them to take the scent from the severed hand, they had gone wild, yowling and barking, fighting to get away. Even now they were snarling and whimpering by turns, pulling at their leashes while Chett cursed them for curs.

It is only a wood, Jon told himself, *and they’re only dead men.* He had seen dead men before...

Last night he had dreamt the Winterfell dream again. He was wandering the empty castle, searching for his father, descending into the crypts. Only this time the dream had gone further than before. In the dark he’d heard the scrape of stone on stone. When he turned he saw that the

vaults were opening, one after the other. As the dead kings came stumbling from their cold black graves, Jon had woken in pitch-dark, his heart hammering. Even when Ghost leapt up on the bed to nuzzle at his face, he could not shake his deep sense of terror. He dared not go back to sleep. Instead he had climbed the Wall and walked, restless, until he saw the light of the dawn off to the east. *It was only a dream. I am a brother of the Night's Watch now, not a frightened boy.*

Samwell Tarly huddled beneath the trees, half-hidden behind the horses. His round fat face was the color of curdled milk. So far he had not lurched off to the woods to retch, but he had not so much as glanced at the dead men either. "I can't look," he whispered miserably.

"You have to look," Jon told him, keeping his voice low so the others would not hear. "Maester Aemon sent you to be his eyes, didn't he? What good are eyes if they're shut?"

"Yes, but... I'm such a coward, Jon."

Jon put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "We have a dozen rangers with us, and the dogs, even Ghost. No one will hurt you, Sam. Go ahead and look. The first look is the hardest."

Sam gave a tremulous nod, working up his courage with a visible effort. Slowly he swiveled his head. His eyes widened, but Jon held his arm so he could not turn away.

"Ser Jaremy," the Old Bear asked gruffly, "Ben Stark had six men with him when he rode from the Wall. Where are the others?"

Ser Jaremy shook his head. "Would that I knew."

Plainly Mormont was not pleased with that answer. "Two of our brothers butchered almost within sight of the Wall, yet your rangers heard nothing, saw nothing. Is this what the Night's Watch has fallen to? Do we still sweep these woods?"

"Yes, my lord, but—"

"Do we still mount watches?"

"We do, but—"

“This man wears a hunting horn.” Mormont pointed at Othor. “Must I suppose that he died without sounding it? Or have your rangers all gone deaf as well as blind?”

Ser Jaremy bristled, his face taut with anger. “No horn was blown, my lord, or my rangers would have heard it. I do not have sufficient men to mount as many patrols as I should like... and since Benjen was lost, we have stayed closer to the Wall than we were wont to do before, by your own command.”

The Old Bear grunted. “Yes. Well. Be that as it may.” He made an impatient gesture. “Tell me how they died.”

Squatting beside the dead man he had named Jafer Flowers, Ser Jaremy grasped his head by the scalp. The hair came out between his fingers, brittle as straw. The knight cursed and shoved at the face with the heel of his hand. A great gash in the side of the corpse’s neck opened like a mouth, crusted with dried blood. Only a few ropes of pale tendon still attached the head to the neck. “This was done with an axe.”

“Aye,” muttered Dywen, the old forester. “Belike the axe that Othor carried, m’lord.”

Jon could feel his breakfast churning in his belly, but he pressed his lips together and made himself look at the second body. Othor had been a big ugly man, and he made a big ugly corpse. No axe was in evidence. Jon remembered Othor; he had been the one bellowing the bawdy song as the rangers rode out. His singing days were done. His flesh was blanched white as milk, everywhere but his hands. His hands were black like Jafer’s. Blossoms of hard cracked blood decorated the mortal wounds that covered him like a rash, breast and groin and throat. Yet his eyes were still open. They stared up at the sky, blue as sapphires.

Ser Jaremy stood. “The wildlings have axes too.”

Mormont rounded on him. “So you believe this is Mance Rayder’s work? This close to the Wall?”

“Who else, my lord?”

Jon could have told him. He knew, they all knew, yet no man of them would say the words. *The Others are only a story, a tale to make children shiver. If they ever lived at all, they are gone eight thousand years.* Even the thought made him feel foolish; he was a man grown now, a black brother of the Night's Watch, not the boy who'd once sat at Old Nan's feet with Bran and Robb and Arya.

Yet Lord Commander Mormont gave a snort. "If Ben Stark had come under wildling attack a half day's ride from Castle Black, he would have returned for more men, chased the killers through all seven hells and brought me back their heads."

"Unless he was slain as well," Ser Jaremy insisted.

The words hurt, even now. It had been so long, it seemed folly to cling to the hope that Ben Stark was still alive, but Jon Snow was nothing if not stubborn.

"It has been close on half a year since Benjen left us, my lord," Ser Jaremy went on. "The forest is vast. The wildlings might have fallen on him anywhere. I'd wager these two were the last survivors of his party, on their way back to us... but the enemy caught them before they could reach the safety of the Wall. The corpses are still fresh, these men cannot have been dead more than a day..."

"No," Samwell Tarly squeaked.

Jon was startled. Sam's nervous, high-pitched voice was the last he would have expected to hear. The fat boy was frightened of the officers, and Ser Jaremy was not known for his patience.

"I did not ask for your views, boy," Rykker said coldly.

"Let him speak, ser," Jon blurted.

Mormont's eyes flicked from Sam to Jon and back again. "If the lad has something to say, I'll hear him out. Come closer, boy. We can't see you behind those horses."

Sam edged past Jon and the garrons, sweating profusely. "My lord, it... it can't be a day or... look... the blood..."

"Yes?" Mormont growled impatiently. "Blood, what of it?"

“He soils his smallclothes at the sight of it,” Chett shouted out, and the rangers laughed.

Sam mopped at the sweat on his brow. “You... you can see where Ghost... Jon’s direwolf... you can see where he tore off that man’s hand, and yet... the stump hasn’t bled, look...” He waved a hand. “My father... L-lord Randyll, he, he made me watch him dress animals sometimes, when... after...” Sam shook his head from side to side, his chins quivering. Now that he had looked at the bodies, he could not seem to look away. “A fresh kill... the blood would still flow, my lords. Later... later it would be clotted, like a... a jelly, thick and... and...” He looked as though he was going to be sick. “This man... look at the wrist, it’s all... *crusty*... dry... like...”

Jon saw at once what Sam meant. He could see the torn veins in the dead man’s wrist, iron worms in the pale flesh. His blood was a black dust. Yet Jaremy Rykker was unconvinced. “If they’d been dead much longer than a day, they’d be ripe by now, boy. They don’t even smell.”

Dywen, the gnarled old forester who liked to boast that he could smell snow coming on, sidled closer to the corpses and took a whiff. “Well, they’re no pansy flowers, but... m’lord has the truth of it. There’s no corpse stink.”

“They... they aren’t rotting.” Sam pointed, his fat finger shaking only a little. “Look, there’s... there’s no maggots or... or... worms or anything... they’ve been lying here in the woods, but they... they haven’t been chewed or eaten by animals... only Ghost... otherwise they’re... they’re...”

“Untouched,” Jon said softly. “And Ghost is different. The dogs and the horses won’t go near them.”

The rangers exchanged glances; they could see it was true, every man of them. Mormont frowned, glancing from the corpses to the dogs. “Chett, bring the hounds closer.”

Chett tried, cursing, yanking on the leashes, giving one animal a lick of his boot. Most of the dogs just whimpered and planted their feet. He tried dragging one. The bitch resisted, growling and squirming as if to escape her

collar. Finally she lunged at him. Chett dropped the leash and stumbled backward. The dog leapt over him and bounded off into the trees.

“This... this is all wrong,” Sam Tarly said earnestly. “The blood... there’s bloodstains on their clothes, and... and their flesh, dry and hard, but... there’s none on the ground, or... anywhere. With those... those... those...” Sam made himself swallow, took a deep breath. “With those *wounds*... terrible wounds... there should be blood all over. Shouldn’t there?”

Dywen sucked at his wooden teeth. “Might be they didn’t die here. Might be someone brought ’em and left ’em for us. A warning, as like.” The old forester peered down suspiciously. “And might be I’m a fool, but I don’t know that Othor never had no blue eyes afore.”

Ser Jaremy looked startled. “Neither did Flowers,” he blurted, turning to stare at the dead man.

A silence fell over the wood. For a moment all they heard was Sam’s heavy breathing and the wet sound of Dywen sucking on his teeth. Jon squatted beside Ghost.

“*Burn them*,” someone whispered. One of the rangers; Jon could not have said who. “Yes, burn them,” a second voice urged.

The Old Bear gave a stubborn shake of his head. “Not yet. I want Maester Aemon to have a look at them. We’ll bring them back to the Wall.”

Some commands are more easily given than obeyed. They wrapped the dead men in cloaks, but when Hake and Dywen tried to tie one onto a horse, the animal went mad, screaming and rearing, lashing out with its hooves, even biting at Ketter when he ran to help. The rangers had no better luck with the other garrons; not even the most placid wanted any part of these burdens. In the end they were forced to hack off branches and fashion crude slings to carry the corpses back on foot. It was well past midday by the time they started back.

“I will have these woods searched,” Mormont commanded Ser Jaremy as they set out. “Every tree, every rock, every bush, and every foot of muddy ground within ten leagues of here. Use all the men you have, and if

you do not have enough, borrow hunters and foresters from the stewards. If Ben and the others are out here, dead or alive, I will have them found. And if there is anyone else in these woods, I will know of it. You are to track them and take them, alive if possible. Is that understood?”

“It is, my lord,” Ser Jaremy said. “It will be done.”

After that, Mormont rode in silence, brooding. Jon followed close behind him; as the Lord Commander’s steward, that was his place. The day was grey, damp, overcast, the sort of day that made you wish for rain. No wind stirred the wood; the air hung humid and heavy, and Jon’s clothes clung to his skin. It was warm. Too warm. The Wall was weeping copiously, had been weeping for days, and sometimes Jon even imagined it was shrinking.

The old men called this weather *spirit summer*, and said it meant the season was giving up its ghosts at last. After this the cold would come, they warned, and a long summer always meant a long winter. This summer had lasted ten years. Jon had been a babe in arms when it began.

Ghost ran with them for a time and then vanished among the trees. Without the direwolf, Jon felt almost naked. He found himself glancing at every shadow with unease. Unbidden, he thought back on the tales that Old Nan used to tell them, when he was a boy at Winterfell. He could almost hear her voice again, and the *click-click-click* of her needles. *In that darkness, the Others came riding*, she used to say, dropping her voice lower and lower. *Cold and dead they were, and they hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every living creature with hot blood in its veins. Holdfasts and cities and kingdoms of men all fell before them, as they moved south on pale dead horses, leading hosts of the slain. They fed their dead servants on the flesh of human children...*

When he caught his first glimpse of the Wall looming above the tops of an ancient gnarled oak, Jon was vastly relieved. Mormont reined up suddenly and turned in his saddle. “Tarly,” he barked, “come here.”

Jon saw the start of fright on Sam’s face as he lumbered up on his mare; doubtless he thought he was in trouble. “You’re fat but you’re not

stupid, boy,” the Old Bear said gruffly. “You did well back there. And you, Snow.”

Sam blushed a vivid crimson and tripped over his own tongue as he tried to stammer out a courtesy. Jon had to smile.

When they emerged from under the trees, Mormont spurred his tough little garron to a trot. Ghost came streaking out from the woods to meet them, licking his chops, his muzzle red from prey. High above, the men on the Wall saw the column approaching. Jon heard the deep, throaty call of the watchman's great horn, calling out across the miles; a single long blast that shuddered through the trees and echoed off the ice.

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The sound faded slowly to silence. One blast meant rangers returning, and Jon thought, *I was a ranger for one day, at least. Whatever may come, they cannot take that away from me.*

Bowen Marsh was waiting at the first gate as they led their garrons through the icy tunnel. The Lord Steward was red-faced and agitated. “My lord,” he blurted at Mormont as he swung open the iron bars, “there’s been a bird, you must come at once.”

“What is it, man?” Mormont said gruffly.

Curiously, Marsh glanced at Jon before he answered. “Maester Aemon has the letter. He’s waiting in your solar.”

“Very well. Jon, see to my horse, and tell Ser Jaremy to put the dead men in a storeroom until the maester is ready for them.” Mormont strode away grumbling.

As they led their horses back to the stable, Jon was uncomfortably aware that people were watching him. Ser Alliser Thorne was drilling his boys in the yard, but he broke off to stare at Jon, a faint half smile on his lips. One-armed Donal Noye stood in the door of the armory. “The gods be with you, Snow,” he called out.

Something's wrong, Jon thought. Something's very wrong.

The dead men were carried to one of the storerooms along the base of the Wall, a dark cold cell chiseled from the ice and used to keep meat and

grain and sometimes even beer. Jon saw that Mormont's horse was fed and watered and groomed before he took care of his own. Afterward he sought out his friends. Grenn and Toad were on watch, but he found Pyp in the common hall. "What's happened?" he asked.

Pyp lowered his voice. "The king's dead."

Jon was stunned. Robert Baratheon had looked old and fat when he visited Winterfell, yet he'd seemed hale enough, and there'd been no talk of illness. "How can you know?"

"One of the guards overheard Clydas reading the letter to Maester Aemon." Pyp leaned close. "Jon, I'm sorry. He was your father's friend, wasn't he?"

"They were as close as brothers, once." Jon wondered if Joffrey would keep his father as the King's Hand. It did not seem likely. That might mean Lord Eddard would return to Winterfell, and his sisters as well. He might even be allowed to visit them, with Lord Mormont's permission. It would be good to see Arya's grin again and to talk with his father. *I will ask him about my mother*, he resolved. *I am a man now, it is past time he told me. Even if she was a whore, I don't care, I want to know.*

"I heard Hake say the dead men were your uncle's," Pyp said.

"Yes," Jon replied. "Two of the six he took with him. They'd been dead a long time, only... the bodies are queer."

"Queer?" Pyp was all curiosity. "How queer?"

"Sam will tell you." Jon did not want to talk of it. "I should see if the Old Bear has need of me."

He walked to the Lord Commander's Tower alone, with a curious sense of apprehension. The brothers on guard eyed him solemnly as he approached. "The Old Bear's in his solar," one of them announced. "He was asking for you."

Jon nodded. He should have come straight from the stable. He climbed the tower steps briskly. *He wants wine or a fire in his hearth, that's all*, he told himself.

When he entered the solar, Mormont's raven screamed at him. "*Corn!*" the bird shrieked. "*Corn! Corn! Corn!*"

"Don't you believe it, I just fed him," the Old Bear growled. He was seated by the window, reading a letter. "Bring me a cup of wine, and pour one for yourself."

"For myself, my lord?"

Mormont lifted his eyes from the letter to stare at Jon. There was pity in that look; he could taste it. "You heard me."

Jon poured with exaggerated care, vaguely aware that he was drawing out the act. When the cups were filled, he would have no choice but to face whatever was in that letter. Yet all too soon, they were filled. "Sit, boy," Mormont commanded him. "Drink."

Jon remained standing. "It's my father, isn't it?"

The Old Bear tapped the letter with a finger. "Your father and the king," he rumbled. "I won't lie to you, it's grievous news. I never thought to see another king, not at my age, with Robert half my years and strong as a bull." He took a gulp of wine. "They say the king loved to hunt. The things we love destroy us every time, lad. Remember that. My son loved that young wife of his. Vain woman. If not for her, he would never have thought to sell those poachers."

Jon could scarcely follow what he was saying. "My lord, I don't understand. What's happened to my father?"

"I told you to sit," Mormont grumbled. "*Sit*," the raven screamed. "And have a drink, damn you. That's a command, Snow."

Jon sat, and took a sip of wine.

"Lord Eddard has been imprisoned. He is charged with treason. It is said he plotted with Robert's brothers to deny the throne to Prince Joffrey."

"No," Jon said at once. "That couldn't be. My father would never betray the king!"

"Be that as it may," said Mormont. "It is not for me to say. Nor for you."

“But it’s a *lie*,” Jon insisted. How could they think his father was a traitor, had they all gone mad? Lord Eddard Stark would never dishonor himself... would he?

He fathered a bastard, a small voice whispered inside him. *Where was the honor in that? And your mother, what of her? He will not even speak her name.*

“My lord, what will happen to him? Will they kill him?”

“As to that, I cannot say, lad. I mean to send a letter. I knew some of the king’s councillors in my youth. Old Pycelle, Lord Stannis, Ser Barristan... Whatever your father has done, or hasn’t done, he is a great lord. He must be allowed to take the black and join us here. Gods knows, we need men of Lord Eddard’s ability.”

Jon knew that other men accused of treason had been allowed to redeem their honor on the Wall in days past. Why not Lord Eddard? His father *here*. That was a strange thought, and strangely uncomfortable. It would be a monstrous injustice to strip him of Winterfell and force him to take the black, and yet if it meant his life...

And would Joffrey allow it? He remembered the prince at Winterfell, the way he’d mocked Robb and Ser Rodrik in the yard. Jon himself he had scarcely even noticed; bastards were beneath even his contempt. “My lord, will the king listen to you?”

The Old Bear shrugged. “A boy king... I imagine he’ll listen to his mother. A pity the dwarf isn’t with them. He’s the lad’s uncle, and he saw our need when he visited us. It was a bad thing, your lady mother taking him captive—”

“Lady Stark is not my mother,” Jon reminded him sharply. Tyrion Lannister had been a friend to him. If Lord Eddard was killed, she would be as much to blame as the queen. “My lord, what of my sisters? Arya and Sansa, they were with my father, do you know—”

“Pycelle makes no mention of them, but doubtless they’ll be treated gently. I will ask about them when I write.” Mormont shook his head. “This could not have happened at a worse time. If ever the realm needed a strong

king... there are dark days and cold nights ahead, I feel it in my bones..." He gave Jon a long shrewd look. "I hope you are not thinking of doing anything stupid, boy."

He's my father, Jon wanted to say, but he knew that Mormont would not want to hear it. His throat was dry. He made himself take another sip of wine.

"Your duty is here now," the Lord Commander reminded him. "Your old life ended when you took the black." His bird made a raucous echo. "*Black.*" Mormont took no notice. "Whatever they do in King's Landing is none of our concern." When Jon did not answer, the old man finished his wine and said, "You're free to go. I'll have no further need of you today. On the morrow you can help me write that letter."

Jon did not remember standing or leaving the solar. The next he knew, he was descending the tower steps, thinking, *This is my father, my sisters, how can it be none of my concern?*

Outside, one of the guards looked at him and said, "Be strong, boy. The gods are cruel."

They know, Jon realized. "My father is no traitor," he said hoarsely. Even the words stuck in his throat, as if to choke him. The wind was rising, and it seemed colder in the yard than it had when he'd gone in. Spirit summer was drawing to an end.

The rest of the afternoon passed as if in a dream. Jon could not have said where he walked, what he did, who he spoke with. Ghost was with him, he knew that much. The silent presence of the direwolf gave him comfort. *The girls do not even have that much*, he thought. *Their wolves might have kept them safe, but Lady is dead and Nymeria's lost, they're all alone.*

A north wind had begun to blow by the time the sun went down. Jon could hear it skirling against the Wall and over the icy battlements as he went to the common hall for the evening meal. Hobb had cooked up a venison stew, thick with barley, onions, and carrots. When he spooned an extra portion onto Jon's plate and gave him the crusty heel of the bread, he

knew what it meant. *He knows*. He looked around the hall, saw heads turn quickly, eyes politely averted. *They all know*.

His friends rallied to him. “We asked the septon to light a candle for your father,” Matthar told him. “It’s a lie, we all know it’s a lie, even *Grenn* knows it’s a lie,” Pyp chimed in. Grenn nodded, and Sam clasped Jon’s hand, “You’re my brother now, so he’s my father too,” the fat boy said. “If you want to go out to the weirwoods and pray to the old gods, I’ll go with you.”

The weirwoods were beyond the Wall, yet he knew Sam meant what he said. *They are my brothers*, he thought. *As much as Robb and Bran and Rickon...*

And then he heard the laughter, sharp and cruel as a whip, and the voice of Ser Alliser Thorne. “Not only a bastard, but a *traitor’s* bastard,” he was telling the men around him.

In the blink of an eye, Jon had vaulted onto the table, dagger in his hand. Pyp made a grab for him, but he wrenched his leg away, and then he was sprinting down the table and kicking the bowl from Ser Alliser’s hand. Stew went flying everywhere, spattering the brothers. Thorne recoiled. People were shouting, but Jon Snow did not hear them. He lunged at Ser Alliser’s face with the dagger, slashing at those cold onyx eyes, but Sam threw himself between them and before Jon could get around him, Pyp was on his back clinging like a monkey, and Grenn was grabbing his arm while Toad wrenched the knife from his fingers.

Later, much later, after they had marched him back to his sleeping cell, Mormont came down to see him, raven on his shoulder. “I told you not to do anything stupid, boy,” the Old Bear said. “*Boy*,” the bird chorused. Mormont shook his head, disgusted. “And to think I had high hopes for you.”

They took his knife and his sword and told him he was not to leave his cell until the high officers met to decide what was to be done with him. And then they placed a guard outside his door to make certain he obeyed. His friends were not allowed to see him, but the Old Bear did relent and permit him Ghost, so he was not utterly alone.

“My father is no traitor,” he told the direwolf when the rest had gone. Ghost looked at him in silence. Jon slumped against the wall, hands around his knees, and stared at the candle on the table beside his narrow bed. The flame flickered and swayed, the shadows moved around him, the room seemed to grow darker and colder. *I will not sleep tonight*, Jon thought.

Yet he must have dozed. When he woke, his legs were stiff and cramped and the candle had long since burned out. Ghost stood on his hind legs, scrabbling at the door. Jon was startled to see how tall he’d grown. “Ghost, what is it?” he called softly. The direwolf turned his head and looked down at him, baring his fangs in a silent snarl. *Has he gone mad?* Jon wondered. “It’s me, Ghost,” he murmured, trying not to sound afraid. Yet he was trembling, violently. When had it gotten so cold?

Ghost backed away from the door. There were deep gouges where he’d raked the wood. Jon watched him with mounting disquiet. “There’s someone out there, isn’t there?” he whispered. Crouching, the direwolf crept backward, white fur rising on the back of his neck. *The guard*, he thought, *they left a man to guard my door, Ghost smells him through the door, that’s all it is.*

Slowly, Jon pushed himself to his feet. He was shivering uncontrollably, wishing he still had a sword. Three quick steps brought him to the door. He grabbed the handle and pulled it inward. The *creak* of the hinges almost made him jump.

His guard was sprawled bonelessly across the narrow steps, looking up at him. Looking *up* at him, even though he was lying on his stomach. His head had been twisted completely around.

It can’t be, Jon told himself. *This is the Lord Commander’s Tower, it’s guarded day and night, this couldn’t happen, it’s a dream, I’m having a nightmare.*

Ghost slid past him, out the door. The wolf started up the steps, stopped, looked back at Jon. That was when he heard it; the soft scrape of a boot on stone, the sound of a latch turning. The sounds came from above. From the Lord Commander’s chambers.

A nightmare this might be, yet it was no dream.

The guard's sword was in its sheath. Jon knelt and worked it free. The heft of steel in his fist made him bolder. He moved up the steps, Ghost padding silently before him. Shadows lurked in every turn of the stair. Jon crept up warily, probing any suspicious darkness with the point of his sword.

Suddenly he heard the shriek of Mormont's raven. "*Corn*," the bird was screaming. "*Corn, corn, corn, corn, corn, corn.*" Ghost bounded ahead, and Jon came scrambling after. The door to Mormont's solar was wide open. The direwolf plunged through. Jon stopped in the doorway, blade in hand, giving his eyes a moment to adjust. Heavy drapes had been pulled across the windows, and the darkness was black as ink. "*Who's there?*" he called out.

Then he saw it, a shadow in the shadows, sliding toward the inner door that led to Mormont's sleeping cell, a man-shape all in black, cloaked and hooded... but beneath the hood, its eyes shone with an icy blue radiance...

Ghost leapt. Man and wolf went down together with neither scream nor snarl, rolling, smashing into a chair, knocking over a table laden with papers. Mormont's raven was flapping overhead, screaming, "*Corn, corn, corn, corn.*" Jon felt as blind as Maester Aemon. Keeping the wall to his back, he slid toward the window and ripped down the curtain. Moonlight flooded the solar. He glimpsed black hands buried in white fur, swollen dark fingers tightening around his direwolf's throat. Ghost was twisting and snapping, legs flailing in the air, but he could not break free.

Jon had no time to be afraid. He threw himself forward, shouting, bringing down the longsword with all his weight behind it. Steel sheared through sleeve and skin and bone, yet the sound was *wrong* somehow. The smell that engulfed him was so queer and cold he almost gagged. He saw arm and hand on the floor, black fingers wriggling in a pool of moonlight. Ghost wrenched free of the other hand and crept away, red tongue lolling from his mouth.

The hooded man lifted his pale moon face, and Jon slashed at it without hesitation. The sword laid the intruder open to the bone, taking off half his nose and opening a gash cheek to cheek under those eyes, eyes, eyes like

blue stars burning. Jon knew that face. *Othor*, he thought, reeling back. *Gods, he's dead, he's dead, I saw him dead.*

He felt something scrabble at his ankle. Black fingers clawed at his calf. The arm was crawling up his leg, ripping at wool and flesh. Shouting with revulsion, Jon pried the fingers off his leg with the point of his sword and flipped the thing away. It lay writhing, fingers opening and closing.

The corpse lurched forward. There was no blood. One-armed, face cut near in half, it seemed to feel nothing. Jon held the longsword before him. "Stay away!" he commanded, his voice gone shrill. "*Corn*," screamed the raven, "*corn, corn.*" The severed arm was wriggling out of its torn sleeve, a pale snake with a black five-fingered head. Ghost pounced and got it between his teeth. Finger bones crunched. Jon hacked at the corpse's neck, felt the steel bite deep and hard.

Dead Othor slammed into him, knocking him off his feet.

Jon's breath went out of him as the fallen table caught him between his shoulder blades. The sword, where was the sword? He'd lost the damned *sword*! When he opened his mouth to scream, the wight jammed its black corpse fingers into Jon's mouth. Gagging, he tried to shove it off, but the dead man was too heavy. Its hand forced itself farther down his throat, icy cold, choking him. Its face was against his own, filling the world. Frost covered its eyes, sparkling blue. Jon raked cold flesh with his nails and kicked at the thing's legs. He tried to bite, tried to punch, tried to breathe...

And suddenly the corpse's weight was gone, its fingers ripped from his throat. It was all Jon could do to roll over, retching and shaking.

Ghost had it again. He watched as the direwolf buried his teeth in the wight's gut and began to rip and tear. He watched, only half conscious, for a long moment before he finally remembered to look for his sword...

... and saw Lord Mormont, naked and groggy from sleep, standing in the doorway with an oil lamp in hand. Gnawed and fingerless, the arm thrashed on the floor, wriggling toward him.

Jon tried to shout, but his voice was gone. Staggering to his feet, he kicked the arm away and snatched the lamp from the Old Bear's fingers.

The flame flickered and almost died. “*Burn!*” the raven cawed. “*Burn, burn, burn!*”

Spinning, Jon saw the drapes he’d ripped from the window. He flung the lamp into the puddled cloth with both hands. Metal crunched, glass shattered, oil spewed, and the hangings went up in a great *whoosh* of flame. The heat of it on his face was sweeter than any kiss Jon had ever known. “Ghost!” he shouted.

The direwolf wrenched free and came to him as the wight struggled to rise, dark snakes spilling from the great wound in its belly. Jon plunged his hand into the flames, grabbed a fistful of the burning drapes, and whipped them at the dead man. *Let it burn*, he prayed as the cloth smothered the corpse, *gods, please, please, let it burn*.