

JON

A blowing rain lashed at Jon's face as he spurred his horse across the swollen stream. Beside him, Lord Commander Mormont gave the hood of his cloak a tug, muttering curses on the weather. His raven sat on his shoulder, feathers ruffled, as soaked and grumpy as the Old Bear himself. A gust of wind sent wet leaves flapping round them like a flock of dead birds. *The haunted forest*, Jon thought ruefully. *The drowned forest*, more like it.

He hoped Sam was holding up, back down the column. He was not a good rider even in fair weather, and six days of rain had made the ground treacherous, all soft mud and hidden rocks. When the wind blew, it drove the water right into their eyes. The Wall would be flowing off to the south, the melting ice mingling with warm rain to wash down in sheets and rivers. Pyp and Toad would be sitting near the fire in the common room, drinking cups of mulled wine before their supper. Jon envied them. His wet wool clung to him sodden and itching, his neck and shoulders ached fiercely from the weight of mail and sword, and he was sick of salt cod, salt beef, and hard cheese.

Up ahead a hunting horn sounded a quavering note, half drowned beneath the constant patter of the rain. "Buckwell's horn," the Old Bear announced. "The gods are good; Craster's still there." His raven gave a single flap of his big wings, croaked "*Corn*," and ruffled his feathers up again.

Jon had often heard the black brothers tell tales of Craster and his keep. Now he would see it with his own eyes. After seven empty villages, they had all come to dread finding Craster's as dead and desolate as the rest, but it seemed they would be spared that. *Perhaps the Old Bear will finally get some answers*, he thought. *Anyway, we'll be out of the rain.*

Thoren Smallwood swore that Craster was a friend to the Watch, despite his unsavory reputation. "The man's half-mad, I won't deny it," he'd told the Old Bear, "but you'd be the same if you'd spent your life in

this cursed wood. Even so, he's never turned a ranger away from his fire, nor does he love Mance Rayder. He'll give us good counsel."

So long as he gives us a hot meal and a chance to dry our clothes, I'll be happy. Dywen said Craster was a kinslayer, liar, raper, and craven, and hinted that he trafficked with slavers and demons. "And worse," the old forester would add, clacking his wooden teeth. "There's a *cold* smell to that one, there is."

"Jon," Lord Mormont commanded, "ride back along the column and spread the word. And remind the officers that I want no trouble about Craster's wives. The men are to mind their hands and speak to these women as little as need be."

"Aye, my lord." Jon turned his horse back the way they'd come. It was pleasant to have the rain out of his face, if only for a little while. Everyone he passed seemed to be weeping. The march was strung out through half a mile of woods.

In the midst of the baggage train, Jon passed Samwell Tarly, slumped in his saddle under a wide floppy hat. He was riding one dray horse and leading the others. The drumming of the rain against the hoods of their cages had the ravens squawking and fluttering. "You put a fox in with them?" Jon called out.

Water ran off the brim of Sam's hat as he lifted his head. "Oh, hullo, Jon. No, they just hate the rain, the same as us."

"How are you faring, Sam?"

"Wetly." The fat boy managed a smile. "Nothing has killed me yet, though."

"Good. Craster's Keep is just ahead. If the gods are good, he'll let us sleep by his fire."

Sam looked dubious. "Dolorous Edd says Craster's a terrible savage. He marries his daughters and obeys no laws but those he makes himself. And Dywen told Grenn he's got black blood in his veins. His mother was a wildling woman who lay with a ranger, so he's a bas..." Suddenly he realized what he was about to say.

“A bastard,” Jon said with a laugh. “You can say it, Sam. I’ve heard the word before.” He put the spurs to his surefooted little garron. “I need to hunt down Ser Ottyn. Be careful around Craster’s women.” As if Samwell Tarly needed warning on that score. “We’ll talk later, after we’ve made camp.”

Jon carried the word back to Ser Ottyn Wythers, plodding along with the rear guard. A small prune-faced man of an age with Mormont, Ser Ottyn always looked tired, even at Castle Black, and the rain had beaten him down unmercifully. “Welcome tidings,” he said. “This wet has soaked my bones, and even my saddle sores complain of saddle sores.”

On his way back, Jon swung wide of the column’s line of march and took a shorter path through the thick of the wood. The sounds of man and horse diminished, swallowed up by the wet green wild, and soon enough he could hear only the steady wash of rain against leaf and tree and rock. It was midafternoon, yet the forest seemed as dark as dusk. Jon wove a path between rocks and puddles, past great oaks, grey-green sentinels, and black-barked ironwoods. In places the branches wove a canopy overhead and he was given a moment’s respite from the drumming of the rain against his head. As he rode past a lightning-blasted chestnut tree overgrown with wild white roses, he heard something rustling in the underbrush. “*Ghost*,” he called out. “Ghost, to me.”

But it was Dywen who emerged from the greenery, forking a shaggy grey garron with Grenn a horse beside him. The Old Bear had deployed outriders to either side of the main column, to screen their march and warn of the approach of any enemies, and even there he took no chances, sending the men out in pairs.

“Ah, it’s you, Lord Snow.” Dywen smiled an oaken smile; his teeth were carved of wood, and fit badly. “Thought me and the boy had us one o’ them Others to deal with. Lose your wolf?”

“He’s off hunting.” Ghost did not like to travel with the column, but he would not be far. When they made camp for the night, he’d find his way to Jon at the Lord Commander’s tent.

“Fishing, I’d call it, in this wet,” Dywen said.

“My mother always said rain was good for growing crops,” Grenn put in hopefully.

“Aye, a good crop of mildew,” Dywen said. “The best thing about a rain like this, it saves a man from taking baths.” He made a clacking sound on his wooden teeth.

“Buckwell’s found Craster,” Jon told them.

“Had he lost him?” Dywen chuckled. “See that you young bucks don’t go nosing about Craster’s wives, you hear?”

Jon smiled. “Want them all for yourself, Dywen?”

Dywen clacked his teeth some more. “Might be I do. Craster’s got ten fingers and one cock, so he don’t count but to eleven. He’d never miss a couple.”

“How many wives does he have, truly?” Grenn asked.

“More’n you ever will, brother. Well, it’s not so hard when you breed your own. There’s your beast, Snow.”

Ghost was trotting along beside Jon’s horse with tail held high, his white fur ruffed up thick against the rain. He moved so silently Jon could not have said just when he appeared. Grenn’s mount shied at the scent of him; even now, after more than a year, the horses were uneasy in the presence of the direwolf. “With me, Ghost.” Jon spurred off to Craster’s Keep.

He had never thought to find a stone castle on the far side of the Wall, but he *had* pictured some sort of motte-and-bailey with a wooden palisade and a timber tower keep. What they found instead was a midden heap, a pigsty, an empty sheepfold, and a windowless daub-and-wattle hall scarce worthy of the name. It was long and low, chinked together from logs and roofed with sod. The compound stood atop a rise too modest to name a hill, surrounded by an earthen dike. Brown rivulets flowed down the slope where the rain had eaten gaping holes in the defenses, to join a rushing brook that curved around to the north, its thick waters turned into a murky torrent by the rains.

On the southwest, he found an open gate flanked by a pair of animal skulls on high poles: a bear to one side, a ram to the other. Bits of flesh still clung to the bear skull, Jon noted as he joined the line riding past. Within, Jarmen Buckwell's scouts and men from Thoren Smallwood's van were setting up horse lines and struggling to raise tents. A host of piglets rooted about three huge sows in the sty. Nearby, a small girl pulled carrots from a garden, naked in the rain, while two women tied a pig for slaughter. The animal's squeals were high and horrible, almost human in their distress. Chett's hounds barked wildly in answer, snarling and snapping despite his curses, with a pair of Craster's dogs barking back. When they saw Ghost, some of the dogs broke off and ran, while others began to bay and growl. The direwolf ignored them, as did Jon.

Well, thirty of us will be warm and dry, Jon thought once he'd gotten a good look at the hall. *Perhaps as many as fifty*. The place was much too small to sleep two hundred men, so most would need to remain outside. And where to put them? The rain had turned half the compound yard to ankle-deep puddles and the rest to sucking mud. Another dismal night was in prospect.

The Lord Commander had entrusted his mount to Dolorous Edd. He was cleaning mud out of the horse's hooves as Jon dismounted. "Lord Mormont's in the hall," he announced. "He said for you to join him. Best leave the wolf outside, he looks hungry enough to eat one of Craster's children. Well, truth be told, *I'm* hungry enough to eat one of Craster's children, so long as he was served hot. Go on, I'll see to your horse. If it's warm and dry inside, don't tell me, I wasn't asked in." He flicked a glob of wet mud out from under a horseshoe. "Does this mud look like shit to you? Could it be that this whole hill is made of Craster's shit?"

Jon smiled. "Well, I hear he's been here a long time."

"You cheer me not. Go see the Old Bear."

"Ghost, stay," he commanded. The door to Craster's Keep was made of two flaps of deerhide. Jon shoved between them, stooping to pass under the low lintel. Two dozen of the chief rangers had preceded him, and were standing around the firepit in the center of the dirt floor while puddles

collected about their boots. The hall stank of soot, dung, and wet dog. The air was heavy with smoke, yet somehow still damp. Rain leaked through the smoke hole in the roof. It was all a single room, with a sleeping loft above reached by a pair of splintery ladders.

Jon remembered how he'd felt the day they had left the Wall: nervous as a maiden, but eager to glimpse the mysteries and wonders beyond each new horizon. *Well, here's one of the wonders*, he told himself, gazing about the squalid, foul-smelling hall. The acrid smoke was making his eyes water. *A pity that Pyp and Toad can't see all they're missing.*

Craster sat above the fire, the only man to enjoy his own chair. Even Lord Commander Mormont must seat himself on the common bench, with his raven muttering on his shoulder. Jarman Buckwell stood behind, dripping from patched mail and shiny wet leather, beside Thoren Smallwood in the late Ser Jaremy's heavy breastplate and sable-trimmed cloak.

Craster's sheepskin jerkin and cloak of sewn skins made a shabby contrast, but around one thick wrist was a heavy ring that had the glint of gold. He looked to be a powerful man, though well into the winter of his days now, his mane of hair grey going to white. A flat nose and a drooping mouth gave him a cruel look, and one of his ears was missing. *So this is a wildling*. Jon remembered Old Nan's tales of the savage folk who drank blood from human skulls. Craster seemed to be drinking a thin yellow beer from a chipped stone cup. Perhaps he had not heard the stories.

"I've not seen Benjen Stark for three years," he was telling Mormont. "And if truth be told, I never once missed him." A half-dozen black puppies and the odd pig or two skulked among the benches, while women in ragged deerskins passed horns of beer, stirred the fire, and chopped carrots and onions into a kettle.

"He ought to have passed here last year," said Thoren Smallwood. A dog came sniffing round his leg. He kicked it and sent it off yipping.

Lord Mormont said, "Ben was searching for Ser Waymar Royce, who'd vanished with Gared and young Will."

“Aye, those three I recall. The lordling no older than one of these pups. Too proud to sleep under my roof, him in his sable cloak and black steel. My wives give him big cow eyes all the same.” He turned his squint on the nearest of the women. “Gared says they were chasing raiders. I told him, with a commander that green, best not catch ’em. Gared wasn’t half-bad, for a crow. Had less ears than me, that one. The ’bite took ’em, same as mine.” Craster laughed. “Now I hear he got no head neither. The ’bite do that too?”

Jon remembered a spray of red blood on white snow, and the way Theon Greyjoy had kicked the dead man’s head. *The man was a deserter.* On the way back to Winterfell, Jon and Robb had raced, and found six direwolf pups in the snow. A thousand years ago.

“When Ser Waymar left you, where was he bound?”

Craster gave a shrug. “Happens I have better things to do than tend to the comings and goings of crows.” He drank a pull of beer and set the cup aside. “Had no good southron wine up here for a bear’s night. I could use me some wine, and a new axe. Mine’s lost its bite, can’t have that, I got me women to protect.” He gazed around at his scurrying wives.

“You are few here, and isolated,” Mormont said. “If you like, I’ll detail some men to escort you south to the Wall.”

The raven seemed to like the notion. “*Wall,*” it screamed, spreading black wings like a high collar behind Mormont’s head.

Their host gave a nasty smile, showing a mouthful of broken brown teeth. “And what would we do there, serve you at supper? We’re free folk here. Craster serves no man.”

“These are bad times to dwell alone in the wild. The cold winds are rising.”

“Let them rise. My roots are sunk deep.” Craster grabbed a passing woman by the wrist. “Tell him, wife. Tell the Lord Crow how well content we are.”

The woman licked at thin lips. “This is our place. Craster keeps us safe. Better to die free than live a slave.”

“Slave,” muttered the raven.

Mormont leaned forward. “Every village we have passed has been abandoned. Yours are the first living faces we’ve seen since we left the Wall. The people are gone... whether dead, fled, or taken, I could not say. The animals as well. Nothing is left. And earlier, we found the bodies of two of Ben Stark’s rangers only a few leagues from the Wall. They were pale and cold, with black hands and black feet and wounds that did not bleed. Yet when we took them back to Castle Black they rose in the night and killed. One slew Ser Jaremy Rykker and the other came for me, which tells me that they remember some of what they knew when they lived, but there was no human mercy left in them.”

The woman’s mouth hung open, a wet pink cave, but Craster only gave a snort. “We’ve had no such troubles here... and I’ll thank you not to tell such evil tales under my roof. I’m a godly man, and the gods keep me safe. If wights come walking, I’ll know how to send them back to their graves. Though I could use me a sharp new axe.” He sent his wife scurrying with a slap on her leg and a shout of “More beer, and be quick about it.”

“No trouble from the dead,” Jarmen Buckwell said, “but what of the living, my lord? What of your king?”

“King!” cried Mormont’s raven. *“King, king, king.”*

“That Mance Rayder?” Craster spit into the fire. “King-beyond-the-Wall. What do free folk want with kings?” He turned his squint on Mormont. “There’s much I could tell you o’ Rayder and his doings, if I had a mind. This o’ the empty villages, that’s his work. You would have found this hall abandoned as well, if I were a man to scrape to such. He sends a rider, tells me I must leave my own keep to come grovel at his feet. I sent the man back, but kept his tongue. It’s nailed to that wall there.” He pointed. “Might be that I could tell you where to seek Mance Rayder. If I had a mind.” The brown smile again. “But we’ll have time enough for that. You’ll be wanting to sleep beneath my roof, belike, and eat me out of pigs.”

“A roof would be most welcome, my lord,” Mormont said. “We’ve had hard riding, and too much wet.”

“Then you’ll guest here for a night. No longer, I’m not that fond o’ crows. The loft’s for me and mine, but you’ll have all the floor you like. I’ve meat and beer for twenty, no more. The rest o’ your black crows can peck after their own corn.”

“We’ve packed in our own supplies, my lord,” said the Old Bear. “We should be pleased to share our food and wine.”

Craster wiped his drooping mouth with the back of a hairy hand. “I’ll taste your wine, Lord Crow, that I will. One more thing. Any man lays a hand on my wives, he loses the hand.”

“Your roof, your rule,” said Thoren Smallwood, and Lord Mormont nodded stiffly, though he looked none too pleased.

“That’s settled, then.” Craster grunted them a grunt. “D’ya have a man can draw a map?”

“Sam Tarly can.” Jon pushed forward. “Sam loves maps.”

Mormont beckoned him closer. “Send him here after he’s eaten. Have him bring quill and parchment. And find Tollett as well. Tell him to bring my axe. A guest gift for our host.”

“Who’s this one now?” Craster said before Jon could go. “He has the look of a Stark.”

“My steward and squire, Jon Snow.”

“A bastard, is it?” Craster looked Jon up and down. “Man wants to bed a woman, seems like he ought to take her to wife. That’s what I do.” He shooed Jon off with a wave. “Well, run and do your service, bastard, and see that axe is good and sharp now, I’ve no use for dull steel.”

Jon Snow bowed stiffly and took his leave. Ser Ottyn Wythers was coming in as he was leaving, and they almost collided at the deerhide door. Outside, the rain seemed to have slackened. Tents had gone up all over the compound. Jon could see the tops of others under the trees.

Dolorous Edd was feeding the horses. “Give the wildling an axe, why not?” He pointed out Mormont’s weapon, a short-hafted battle-axe with gold scrollwork inlaid on the black steel blade. “He’ll give it back, I vow. Buried in the Old Bear’s skull, like as not. Why not give him *all* our axes,

and our swords as well? I mislike the way they clank and rattle as we ride. We'd travel faster without them, straight to hell's door. Does it rain in hell, I wonder? Perhaps Craster would like a nice hat instead."

Jon smiled. "He wants an axe. And wine as well."

"See, the Old Bear's clever. If we get the wildling well and truly drunk, perhaps he'll only cut off an ear when he tries to slay us with that axe. I have two ears but only one head."

"Smallwood says Craster is a friend to the Watch."

"Do you know the difference between a wildling who's a friend to the Watch and one who's not?" asked the dour squire. "Our enemies leave our bodies for the crows and the wolves. Our friends bury us in secret graves. I wonder how long that bear's been nailed up on that gate, and what Craster had there before we came hallooing?" Edd looked at the axe doubtfully, the rain running down his long face. "Is it dry in there?"

"Drier than out here."

"If I lurk about after, not too close to the fire, belike they'll take no note of me till morn. The ones under his roof will be the first he murders, but at least we'll die dry."

Jon had to laugh. "Craster's one man. We're two hundred. I doubt he'll murder anyone."

"You cheer me," said Edd, sounding utterly morose. "And besides, there's much to be said for a good sharp axe. I'd hate to be murdered with a maul. I saw a man hit in the brow with a maul once. Scarce split the skin at all, but his head turned mushy and swelled up big as a gourd, only purply-red. A comely man, but he died ugly. It's good that we're not giving them mauls." Edd walked away shaking his head, his sodden black cloak shedding rain behind him.

Jon got the horses fed before he stopped to think of his own supper. He was wondering where to find Sam when he heard a shout of fear. "*Wolf!*" He sprinted around the hall toward the cry, the earth sucking at his boots. One of Craster's women was backed up against the mud-spattered wall of the keep. "Keep away," she was shouting at Ghost. "You keep away!" The

direwolf had a rabbit in his mouth and another dead and bloody on the ground before him. “Get it away, m’lord,” she pleaded when she saw him.

“He won’t hurt you.” He knew at once what had happened; a wooden hutch, its slats shattered, lay on its side in the wet grass. “He must have been hungry. We haven’t seen much game.” Jon whistled. The direwolf bolted down the rabbit, crunching the small bones between his teeth, and padded over to him.

The woman regarded them with nervous eyes. She was younger than he’d thought at first. A girl of fifteen or sixteen years, he judged, dark hair plastered across a gaunt face by the falling rain, her bare feet muddy to the ankles. The body under the sewn skins was showing in the early turns of pregnancy. “Are you one of Craster’s daughters?” he asked.

She put a hand over her belly. “Wife now.” Edging away from the wolf, she knelt mournfully beside the broken hutch. “I was going to breed them rabbits. There’s no sheep left.”

“The Watch will make good for them.” Jon had no coin of his own, or he would have offered it to her... though he was not sure what good a few coppers or even a silver piece would do her beyond the Wall. “I’ll speak to Lord Mormont on the morrow.”

She wiped her hands on her skirt. “M’lord—”

“I’m no lord.”

But others had come crowding round, drawn by the woman’s scream and the crash of the rabbit hutch. “Don’t you believe him, girl,” called out Lark the Sisterman, a ranger mean as a cur. “That’s Lord Snow himself.”

“Bastard of Winterfell and brother to kings,” mocked Chett, who’d left his hounds to see what the commotion was about.

“That wolf’s looking at you hungry, girl,” Lark said. “Might be it fancies that tender bit in your belly.”

Jon was not amused. “You’re scaring her.”

“Warning her, more like.” Chett’s grin was as ugly as the boils that covered most of his face.

“We’re not to talk to you,” the girl remembered suddenly.

“Wait,” Jon said, too late. She bolted, ran.

Lark made a grab for the second rabbit, but Ghost was quicker. When he bared his teeth, the Sisterman slipped in the mud and went down on his bony butt. The others laughed. The direwolf took the rabbit in his mouth and brought it to Jon.

“There was no call to scare the girl,” he told them.

“We’ll hear no scolds from you, bastard.” Chett blamed Jon for the loss of his comfortable position with Maester Aemon, and not without justice. If he had not gone to Aemon about Sam Tarly, Chett would still be tending an old blind man instead of a pack of ill-tempered hunting hounds. “You may be the Lord Commander’s pet, but you’re not the Lord Commander... and you wouldn’t talk so bloody bold without that monster of yours always about.”

“I’ll not fight a brother while we’re beyond the Wall,” Jon answered, his voice cooler than he felt.

Lark got to one knee. “He’s afraid of you, Chett. On the Sisters, we have a name for them like him.”

“I know all the names. Save your breath.” He walked away, Ghost at his side. The rain had dwindled to a thin drizzle by the time he reached the gate. Dusk would be on them soon, followed by another wet dark dismal night. The clouds would hide moon and stars and Mormont’s Torch, turning the woods black as pitch. Every piss would be an adventure, if not quite of the sort Jon Snow had once envisioned.

Out under the trees, some rangers had found enough duff and dry wood to start a fire beneath a slanting ridge of slate. Others had raised tents or made rude shelters by stretching their cloaks over low branches. Giant had crammed himself inside the hollow of a dead oak. “How d’ye like my castle, Lord Snow?”

“It looks snug. You know where Sam is?”

“Keep on the way you were. If you come on Ser Ottyn’s pavilion, you’ve gone too far.” Giant smiled. “Unless Sam’s found him a tree too. What a tree that would be.”

It was Ghost who found Sam in the end. The direwolf shot ahead like a quarrel from a crossbow. Under an outcrop of rock that gave some small degree of shelter from the rain, Sam was feeding the ravens. His boots squished when he moved. "My feet are soaked through," he admitted miserably. "When I climbed off my horse, I stepped in a hole and went in up to my knees."

"Take off your boots and dry your stockings. I'll find some dry wood. If the ground's not wet under the rock, we might be able to get a fire burning." Jon showed Sam the rabbit. "And we'll feast."

"Won't you be attending Lord Mormont in the hall?"

"No, but you will. The Old Bear wants you to map for him. Craster says he'll find Mance Rayder for us."

"Oh." Sam did not look anxious to meet Craster, even if it meant a warm fire.

"He said eat first, though. Dry your feet." Jon went to gather fuel, digging down under deadfalls for the drier wood beneath and peeling back layers of sodden pine needles until he found likely kindling. Even then, it seemed to take forever for a spark to catch. He hung his cloak from the rock to keep the rain off his smoky little fire, making them a small snug alcove.

As he knelt to skin the rabbit, Sam pulled off his boots. "I think there's moss growing between my toes," he declared mournfully, wriggling the toes in question. "The rabbit will taste good. I don't even mind about the blood and all." He looked away. "Well, only a little..."

Jon spat the carcass, banked the fire with a pair of rocks, and balanced their meal atop them. The rabbit had been a scrawny thing, but as it cooked it smelled like a king's feast. Other rangers gave them envious looks. Even Ghost looked up hungrily, flames shining in his red eyes as he sniffed. "You had yours before," Jon reminded him.

"Is Craster as savage as the rangers say?" Sam asked. The rabbit was a shade underdone, but tasted wonderful. "What's his castle like?"

"A midden heap with a roof and a firepit." Jon told Sam what he had seen and heard in Craster's Keep.

By the time the telling was done, it was dark outside and Sam was licking his fingers. “That was good, but now I’d like a leg of lamb. A whole leg, just for me, sauced with mint and honey and cloves. Did you see any lambs?”

“There was a sheepfold, but no sheep.”

“How does he feed all his men?”

“I didn’t see any men. Just Craster and his women and a few small girls. I wonder he’s able to hold the place. His defenses were nothing to speak of, only a muddy dike. You had better go up to the hall and draw that map. Can you find the way?”

“If I don’t fall in the mud.” Sam struggled back into his boots, collected quill and parchment, and shouldered out into the night, the rain pattering down on his cloak and floppy hat.

Ghost laid his head on his paws and went to sleep by the fire. Jon stretched out beside him, grateful for the warmth. He was cold and wet, but not so cold and wet as he’d been a short time before. *Perhaps tonight the Old Bear will learn something that will lead us to Uncle Benjen.*

He woke to the sight of his own breath misting in the cold morning air. When he moved, his bones ached. Ghost was gone, the fire burnt out. Jon reached to pull aside the cloak he’d hung over the rock, and found it stiff and frozen. He crept beneath it and stood up in a forest turned to crystal.

The pale pink light of dawn sparkled on branch and leaf and stone. Every blade of grass was carved from emerald, every drip of water turned to diamond. Flowers and mushrooms alike wore coats of glass. Even the mud puddles had a bright brown sheen. Through the shimmering greenery, the black tents of his brothers were encased in a fine glaze of ice.

So there is magic beyond the Wall after all. He found himself thinking of his sisters, perhaps because he’d dreamed of them last night. Sansa would call this an enchantment, and tears would fill her eyes at the wonder of it, but Arya would run out laughing and shouting, wanting to touch it all.

“*Lord Snow?*” he heard. Soft and meek. He turned.

Crouched atop the rock that had sheltered him during the night was the rabbit keeper, wrapped in a black cloak so large it drowned her. *Sam's cloak*, Jon realized at once. *Why is she wearing Sam's cloak?* “The fat one told me I’d find you here, m’lord,” she said.

“We ate the rabbit, if that’s what you came for.” The admission made him feel absurdly guilty.

“Old Lord Crow, him with the talking bird, he gave Craster a crossbow worth a hundred rabbits.” Her arms closed over the swell of her belly. “Is it true, m’lord? Are you brother to a king?”

“A half brother,” he admitted. “I’m Ned Stark’s bastard. My brother Robb is the King in the North. Why are you here?”

“The fat one, that Sam, he said to see you. He give me his cloak, so no one would say I didn’t belong.”

“Won’t Craster be angry with you?”

“My father drank overmuch of the Lord Crow’s wine last night. He’ll sleep most of the day.” Her breath frosted the air in small nervous puffs. “They say the king gives justice and protects the weak.” She started to climb off the rock, awkwardly, but the ice had made it slippery and her foot went out from under her. Jon caught her before she could fall, and helped her safely down. The woman knelt on the icy ground. “M’lord, I beg you —”

“Don’t beg me anything. Go back to your hall, you shouldn’t be here. We were commanded not to speak to Craster’s women.”

“You don’t have to speak with me, m’lord. Just take me with you, when you go, that’s all I ask.”

All she asks, he thought. *As if that were nothing.*

“I’ll... I’ll be your wife, if you like. My father, he’s got nineteen now, one less won’t hurt him none.”

“Black brothers are sworn never to take wives, don’t you know that? And we’re guests in your father’s hall besides.”

“Not *you*,” she said. “I watched. You never ate at his board, nor slept by his fire. He never gave you guest-right, so you’re not bound to him. It’s for

the baby I have to go.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Gilly, he called me. For the gillyflower.”

“That’s pretty.” He remembered Sansa telling him once that he should say that whenever a lady told him her name. He could not help the girl, but perhaps the courtesy would please her. “Is it Craster who frightens you, Gilly?”

“For the baby, not for me. If it’s a girl, that’s not so bad, she’ll grow a few years and he’ll marry her. But Nella says it’s to be a boy, and she’s had six and knows these things. He gives the boys to the gods. Come the white cold, he does, and of late it comes more often. That’s why he started giving them sheep, even though he has a taste for mutton. Only now the sheep’s gone too. Next it will be dogs, till...” She lowered her eyes and stroked her belly.

“What gods?” Jon was remembering that they’d seen no boys in Craster’s Keep, nor men either, save Craster himself.

“The cold gods,” she said. “The ones in the night. The white shadows.”

And suddenly Jon was back in the Lord Commander’s Tower again. A severed hand was climbing his calf and when he pried it off with the point of his longsword, it lay writhing, fingers opening and closing. The dead man rose to his feet, blue eyes shining in that gashed and swollen face. Ropes of torn flesh hung from the great wound in his belly, yet there was no blood.

“What color are their eyes?” he asked her.

“Blue. As bright as blue stars, and as cold.”

She has seen them, he thought. *Craster lied.*

“Will you take me? Just so far as the Wall—”

“We do not ride for the Wall. We ride north, after Mance Rayder and these Others, these white shadows and their wights. We *seek* them, Gilly. Your babe would not be safe with us.”

Her fear was plain on her face. “You will come back, though. When your warring’s done, you’ll pass this way again.”

“We may.” *If any of us still live.* “That’s for the Old Bear to say, the one you call the Lord Crow. I’m only his squire. I do not choose the road I ride.”

“No.” He could hear the defeat in her voice. “Sorry to be of trouble, m’lord. I only... they said the king keeps people safe, and I thought...” Despairing, she ran, Sam’s cloak flapping behind her like great black wings.

Jon watched her go, his joy in the morning’s brittle beauty gone. *Damn her*, he thought resentfully, *and damn Sam twice for sending her to me. What did he think I could do for her? We’re here to fight wildlings, not save them.*

Other men were crawling from their shelters, yawning and stretching. The magic was already faded, icy brightness turning back to common dew in the light of the rising sun. Someone had gotten a fire started; he could smell woodsmoke drifting through the trees, and the smoky scent of bacon. Jon took down his cloak and snapped it against the rock, shattering the thin crust of ice that had formed in the night, then gathered up Longclaw and shrugged an arm through a shoulder strap. A few yards away he made water into a frozen bush, his piss steaming in the cold air and melting the ice wherever it fell. Afterward he laced up his black wool breeches and followed the smells.

Grenn and Dywen were among the brothers who had gathered round the fire. Hake handed Jon a hollow heel of bread filled with burnt bacon and chunks of salt fish warmed in bacon grease. He wolfed it down while listening to Dywen boast of having three of Craster’s women during the night.

“You did not,” Grenn said, scowling. “I would have seen.”

Dywen whapped him up alongside his ear with the back of his hand. “You? Seen? You’re blind as Maester Aemon. You never even saw that bear.”

“What bear? Was there a bear?”

“There’s always a bear,” declared Dolorous Edd in his usual tone of gloomy resignation. “One killed my brother when I was young. Afterward it wore his teeth around its neck on a leather thong. And they were good teeth too, better than mine. I’ve had nothing but trouble with my teeth.”

“Did Sam sleep in the hall last night?” Jon asked him.

“I’d not call it sleeping. The ground was hard, the rushes ill-smelling, and my brothers snore frightfully. Speak of bears if you will, none ever growled so fierce as Brown Bernarr. I was warm, though. Some dogs crawled atop me during the night. My cloak was almost dry when one of them pissed in it. Or perhaps it was Brown Bernarr. Have you noticed that the rain stopped the instant I had a roof above me? It will start again now that I’m back out. Gods and dogs alike delight to piss on me.”

“I’d best go see to Lord Mormont,” said Jon.

The rain might have stopped, but the compound was still a morass of shallow lakes and slippery mud. Black brothers were folding their tents, feeding their horses, and chewing on strips of salt beef. Jarman Buckwell’s scouts were tightening the girths on their saddles before setting out. “Jon,” Buckwell greeted him from horseback. “Keep a good edge on that bastard sword of yours. We’ll be needing it soon enough.”

Craster’s hall was dim after daylight. Inside, the night’s torches had burned low, and it was hard to know that the sun had risen. Lord Mormont’s raven was the first to spy him enter. Three lazy flaps of its great black wings, and it perched atop Longclaw’s hilt. “*Corn?*” It nipped at a strand of Jon’s hair.

“Ignore that wretched beggar bird, Jon, it’s just had half my bacon.” The Old Bear sat at Craster’s board, breaking his fast with the other officers on fried bread, bacon, and sheepgut sausage. Craster’s new axe was on the table, its gold inlay gleaming faintly in the torchlight. Its owner was sprawled unconscious in the sleeping loft above, but the women were all up, moving about and serving. “What sort of day do we have?”

“Cold, but the rain has stopped.”

“Very good. See that my horse is saddled and ready. I mean for us to ride within the hour. Have you eaten? Craster serves plain fare, but filling.”

I will not eat Craster's food, he decided suddenly. “I broke my fast with the men, my lord.” Jon shooed the raven off Longclaw. The bird hopped back to Mormont's shoulder, where it promptly shat. “You might have done that on Snow instead of saving it for me,” the Old Bear grumbled. The raven *quorked*.

He found Sam behind the hall, standing with Gilly at the broken rabbit hutch. She was helping him back into his cloak, but when she saw Jon she stole away. Sam gave him a look of wounded reproach. “I thought you would help her.”

“And how was I to do that?” Jon said sharply. “Take her with us, wrapped up in your cloak? We were commanded not to—”

“I know,” said Sam guiltily, “but she was afraid. I know what it is to be afraid. I told her...” He swallowed.

“*What?* That we'd take her with us?”

Sam's fat face blushed a deep red. “On the way home.” He could not meet Jon's eyes. “She's going to have a baby.”

“Sam, have you taken leave of all your sense? We may not even return this way. And if we do, do you think the Old Bear is going to let you pack off one of Craster's wives?”

“I thought... maybe by then I could think of a way...”

“I have no time for this, I have horses to groom and saddle.” Jon walked away as confused as he was angry. Sam's heart was as big as the rest of him, but for all his reading he could be as thick as Grenn at times. It was impossible, and dishonorable besides. *So why do I feel so ashamed?*

Jon took his accustomed position at Mormont's side as the Night's Watch streamed out past the skulls on Craster's gate. They struck off north and west along a crooked game trail. Melting ice dripped down all about them, a slower sort of rain with its own soft music. North of the compound, the brook was in full spate, choked with leaves and bits of wood, but the scouts had found where the ford lay and the column was able to splash

across. The water ran as high as a horse's belly. Ghost swam, emerging on the bank with his white fur dripping brown. When he shook, spraying mud and water in all directions, Mormont said nothing, but on his shoulder the raven screeched.

"My lord," Jon said quietly as the wood closed in around them once more. "Craster has no sheep. Nor any sons."

Mormont made no answer.

"At Winterfell one of the serving women told us stories," Jon went on. "She used to say that there were wildlings who would lay with the Others to birth half-human children."

"Hearth tales. Does Craster seem less than human to you?"

In half a hundred ways. "He gives his sons to the wood."

A long silence. Then: "Yes." And "*Yes*," the raven muttered, strutting. "*Yes, yes, yes.*"

"You knew?"

"Smallwood told me. Long ago. All the rangers know, though few will talk of it."

"Did my uncle know?"

"All the rangers," Mormont repeated. "You think I ought to stop him. Kill him if need be." The Old Bear sighed. "Were it only that he wished to rid himself of some mouths, I'd gladly send Yoren or Conwys to collect the boys. We could raise them to the black and the Watch would be that much the stronger. But the wildlings serve crueler gods than you or I. These boys are Craster's offerings. His prayers, if you will."

His wives must offer different prayers, Jon thought.

"How is it you came to know this?" the Old Bear asked him. "From one of Craster's wives?"

"Yes, my lord," Jon confessed. "I would sooner not tell you which. She was frightened and wanted help."

"The wide world is full of people wanting help, Jon. Would that some could find the courage to help themselves. Craster sprawls in his loft even

now, stinking of wine and lost to sense. On his board below lies a sharp new axe. Were it me, I'd name it 'Answered Prayer' and make an end."

Yes. Jon thought of Gilly. She and her sisters. They were nineteen, and Craster was one, but...

"Yet it would be an ill day for us if Craster died. Your uncle could tell you of the times Craster's Keep made the difference between life and death for our rangers."

"My father..." He hesitated.

"Go on, Jon. Say what you would say."

"My father once told me that some men are not worth having," Jon finished. "A bannerman who is brutal or unjust dishonors his liege lord as well as himself."

"Craster is his own man. He has sworn us no vows. Nor is he subject to our laws. Your heart is noble, Jon, but learn a lesson here. We cannot set the world to rights. That is not our purpose. The Night's Watch has other wars to fight."

Other wars. Yes. I must remember. "Jarman Buckwell said I might have need of my sword soon."

"Did he?" Mormont did not seem pleased. "Craster said much and more last night, and confirmed enough of my fears to condemn me to a sleepless night on his floor. Mance Rayder is gathering his people together in the Frostfangs. That's why the villages are empty. It is the same tale that Ser Denys Mallister had from the wildling his men captured in the Gorge, but Craster has added the *where*, and that makes all the difference."

"Is he making a city, or an army?"

"Now, that is the question. How many wildlings are there? How many men of fighting age? No one knows with certainty. The Frostfangs are cruel, inhospitable, a wilderness of stone and ice. They will not long sustain any great number of people. I can see only one purpose in this gathering. Mance Rayder means to strike south, into the Seven Kingdoms."

"Wildlings have invaded the realm before." Jon had heard the tales from Old Nan and Maester Luwin both, back at Winterfell. "Raymun

Redbeard led them south in the time of my grandfather's grandfather, and before him there was a king named Bael the Bard."

"Aye, and long before them came the Horned Lord and the brother kings Gendel and Gorne, and in ancient days Joramun, who blew the Horn of Winter and woke giants from the earth. Each man of them broke his strength on the Wall, or was broken by the power of Winterfell on the far side... but the Night's Watch is only a shadow of what we were, and who remains to oppose the wildlings besides us? The Lord of Winterfell is dead, and his heir has marched his strength south to fight the Lannisters. The wildlings may never again have such a chance as this. I knew Mance Rayder, Jon. He is an oathbreaker, yes... but he has eyes to see, and no man has ever dared to name him faintheart."

"What will we do?" asked Jon.

"Find him," said Mormont. "Fight him. Stop him."

Three hundred, thought Jon, *against the fury of the wild*. His fingers opened and closed.