

JON

“Let them die,” said Queen Selyse.

It was the answer that Jon Snow had expected. *This queen never fails to disappoint.* Somehow that did not soften the blow. “Your Grace,” he persisted stubbornly, “they are starving at Hardhome by the thousands. Many are women—”

“—and children, yes. Very sad.” The queen pulled her daughter closer to her and kissed her cheek. *The cheek unmarred by greyscale,* Jon did not fail to note. “We are sorry for the little ones, of course, but we must be sensible. We have no food for them, and they are too young to help the king my husband in his wars. Better that they be reborn into the light.”

That was just a softer way of saying *let them die.*

The chamber was crowded. Princess Shireen stood beside her mother’s seat, with Patchface cross-legged at her feet. Behind the queen loomed Ser Axell Florent. Melisandre of Asshai stood closer to the fire, the ruby at her throat pulsing with every breath she took. The red woman too had her attendants—the squire Devan Seaworth and two of the guardsmen the king had left her.

Queen Selyse’s protectors stood along the walls, shining knights all in a row: Ser Malegorn, Ser Benethon, Ser Narbert, Ser Patrek, Ser Dorden, Ser Brus. With so many bloodthirsty wildlings infesting Castle Black, Selyse kept her sworn shields about her night and day. Tormund Giants-bane had roared to hear it. “Afraid of being carried off, is she? I hope you never said how big me member is, Jon Snow, that’d frighten any woman. I always wanted me one with a mustache.” Then he laughed and laughed.

He would not be laughing now.

Jon had wasted enough time here. “I’m sorry to have troubled Your Grace. The Night’s Watch will attend to this matter.”

The queen's nostrils flared. "You still mean to ride to Hardhome. I see it on your face. *Let them die*, I said, yet you will persist in this mad folly. Do not deny it."

"I must do as I think best. With respect, Your Grace, the Wall is mine, and so is this decision."

"It is," Selyse allowed, "and you will answer for it when the king returns. And for other decisions you have made, I fear. But I see that you are deaf to sense. Do what you must."

Up spoke Ser Malegorn. "Lord Snow, who will lead this ranging?"

"Are you offering yourself, ser?"

"Do I look so foolish?"

Patchface jumped up. "I will lead it!" His bells rang merrily. "We will march into the sea and out again. Under the waves we will ride seahorses, and mermaids will blow seashells to announce our coming, oh, oh, oh."

They all laughed. Even Queen Selyse allowed herself a thin smile. Jon was less amused. "I will not ask my men to do what I would not do myself. I mean to lead the ranging."

"How bold of you," said the queen. "We approve. Afterward some bard will make a stirring song about you, no doubt, and we shall have a more prudent lord commander." She took a sip of wine. "Let us speak of other matters. Axell, bring in the wildling king, if you would be so good."

"At once, Your Grace." Ser Axell went through a door and returned a moment later with Gerrick Kingsblood. "Gerrick of House Redbeard," he announced, "King of the Wildlings."

Gerrick Kingsblood was a tall man, long of leg and broad of shoulder. The queen had dressed him in some of the king's old clothes, it appeared. Scrubbed and groomed, clad in green velvets and an ermine half-cape, with his long red hair freshly washed and his fiery beard shaped and trimmed,

the wildling looked every inch a southron lord. *He could walk into the throne room at King's Landing, and no one would blink an eye*, Jon thought.

“Gerrick is the true and rightful king of the wildlings,” the queen said, “descended in an unbroken male line from their great king Raymun Redbeard, whereas the usurper Mance Rayder was born of some common woman and fathered by one of your black brothers.”

No, Jon might have said, *Gerrick is descended from a younger brother of Raymun Redbeard*. To the free folk that counted about as much as being descended from Raymun Redbeard's horse. *They know nothing, Ygritte. And worse, they will not learn.*

“Gerrick has graciously agreed to give the hand of his eldest daughter to my beloved Axell, to be united by the Lord of Light in holy wedlock,” Queen Selyse said. “His other girls shall wed at the same time—the second daughter with Ser Brus Buckler and the youngest with Ser Malegorn of Redpool.”

“Sers.” Jon inclined his head to the knights in question. “May you find happiness with your betrothed.”

“Under the sea, men marry fishes.” Patchface did a little dance step, jingling his bells. “They do, they do, they do.”

Queen Selyse sniffed again. “Four marriages can be made as simply as three. It is past time that this woman Val was settled, Lord Snow. I have decided that she shall wed my good and leal knight, Ser Patrek of King's Mountain.”

“Has Val been told, Your Grace?” asked Jon. “Amongst the free folk, when a man desires a woman, he steals her, and thus proves his strength, his cunning, and his courage. The suitor risks a savage beating if he is caught by the woman's kin, and worse than that if she herself finds him unworthy.”

“A savage custom,” Axell Florent said.

Ser Patrek only chuckled. “No man has ever had cause to question my courage. No woman ever will.”

Queen Selyse pursed her lips. “Lord Snow, as Lady Val is a stranger to our ways, please send her to me, that I might instruct her in the duties of a noble lady toward her lord husband.”

That will go splendidly, I know. Jon wondered if the queen would be so eager to see Val married to one of her own knights if she knew Val’s feelings about Princess Shireen. “As you wish,” he said, “though if I might speak freely—”

“No, I think not. You may take your leave of us.”

Jon Snow bent his knee, bowed his head, withdrew.

He took the steps two at a time, nodding to the queen’s guards as he descended. Her Grace had posted men on every landing to keep her safe from murderous wildlings. Halfway down, a voice called out from above him. “Jon Snow.”

Jon turned. “Lady Melisandre.”

“We must speak.”

“Must we?” *I think not.* “My lady, I have duties.”

“It is those duties I would speak of.” She made her way down, the hem of her scarlet skirts swishing over the steps. It almost seemed as if she floated. “Where is your direwolf?”

“Asleep in my chambers. Her Grace does not allow Ghost in her presence. She claims he scares the princess. And so long as Borroq and his boar are about, I dare not let him loose.” The skinchanger was to accompany Soren Shieldbreaker to Stonedoor once the wayns carrying the Seal-skinner’s clan to Greenguard returned. Until such time, Borroq had taken up residence in one of the ancient tombs beside the castle lichyard. The company of men long dead seemed to suit him better than that of the living, and his boar

seemed happy rooting amongst the graves, well away from other animals.
“That thing is the size of a bull, with tusks as long as swords. Ghost would go after him if he were loose, and one or both of them would not survive the meeting.”

“Borroq is the least of your concerns. This ranging ...”

“A word from you might have swayed the queen.”

“Selyse has the right of this, Lord Snow. *Let them die*. You cannot save them. Your ships are lost—”

“Six remain. More than half the fleet.”

“Your ships are lost. *All* of them. Not a man shall return. I have seen that in my fires.”

“Your fires have been known to lie.”

“I have made mistakes, I have admitted as much, but—”

“A grey girl on a dying horse. Daggers in the dark. A promised prince, born in smoke and salt. It seems to me that you make nothing *but* mis-takes, my lady. Where is Stannis? What of Rattleshirt and his spearwives? *Where is my sister?*”

“All your questions shall be answered. Look to the skies, Lord Snow. And when you have your answers, send to me. Winter is almost upon us now. I am your only hope.”

“A fool’s hope.” Jon turned and left her.

Leathers was prowling the yard outside. “Toregg has returned,” he reported when Jon emerged. “His father’s settled his people at Oakenshield and will be back this afternoon with eighty fighting men. What did the bearded queen have to say?”

“Her Grace can provide no help.”

“Too busy plucking out her chin hairs, is she?” Leathers spat. “Makes no matter. Tormund’s men and ours will be enough.”

Enough to get us there, perhaps. It was the journey back that concerned Jon Snow. Coming home, they would be slowed by thousands of free folk, many sick and starved. *A river of humanity moving slower than a river of ice.* That would leave them vulnerable. *Dead things in the woods. Dead things in the water.* “How many men are enough?” he asked Leathers. “A hundred? Two hundred? Five hundred? A thousand?” *Should I take more men, or fewer?* A smaller ranging would reach Hardhome sooner ... but what good were swords without food? Mother Mole and her people were already at the point of eating their own dead. To feed them, he would need to bring carts and wagons, and draft animals to haul them—horses, oxen, dogs. Instead of flying through the wood, they would be condemned to crawl. “There is still much to decide. Spread the word. I want all the leading men in the Shieldhall when the evening watch begins. Tormund should be back by then. Where can I find Toregg?”

“With the little monster, like as not. He’s taken a liking to one o’ them milkmaids, I hear.”

He has taken a liking to Val. Her sister was a queen, why not her? Tormund had once thought to make himself the King-Beyond-the-Wall, before Mance had bested him. Toregg the Tall might well be dreaming the same dream. *Better him than Gerrick Kingsblood.* “Let them be,” said Jon. “I can speak with Toregg later.” He glanced up past the King’s Tower. The Wall was a dull white, the sky above it whiter. *A snow sky.* “Just pray we do not get another storm.”

Outside the armory, Mully and the Flea stood shivering at guard. “Shouldn’t you be inside, out of this wind?” Jon asked.

“That’d be sweet, m’lord,” said Fulk the Flea, “but your wolf’s in no mood for company today.”

Mully agreed. “He tried to take a bite o’ me, he did.”

“*Ghost?*” Jon was shocked. “Unless your lordship has some other white wolf, aye. I never seen him like this, m’lord. All wild-like, I mean.”

He was not wrong, as Jon discovered for himself when he slipped inside the doors. The big white direwolf would not lie still. He paced from one end of the armory to the other, past the cold forge and back again. “Easy, Ghost,” Jon called. “Down. Sit, Ghost. *Down.*” Yet when he made to touch him, the wolf bristled and bared his teeth. *It’s that bloody boar. Even in here, Ghost can smell his stink.*

Mormont’s raven seemed agitated too. “*Snow,*” the bird kept screaming. “*Snow, snow, snow.*” Jon shooed him off, had Satin start a fire, then sent him out after Bowen Marsh and Othell Yarwyck. “Bring a flagon of mulled wine as well.”

“Three cups, m’lord?”

“Six. Mully and the Flea look in need of something warm. So will you.”

When Satin left, Jon seated himself and had another look at the maps of the lands north of the Wall. The fastest way to Hardhome was along the coast ... from Eastwatch. The woods were thinner near the sea, the terrain mostly flatlands, rolling hills, and salt marshes. And when the autumn storms came howling, the coast got sleet and hail and freezing rain rather than snow. *The giants are at Eastwatch, and Leathers says that some will help.* From Castle Black the way was more difficult, right through the heart of the haunted forest. *If the snow is this deep at the Wall, how much worse up there?*

Marsh entered snuffling, Yarwyck dour. “Another storm,” the First Builder announced. “How are we to work in this? I need more builders.”

“Use the free folk,” Jon said.

Yarwyck shook his head. “More trouble than they’re worth, that lot. Sloppy, careless, lazy ... some good woodworkers here and there, I’ll not deny it, but hardly a mason amongst them, and nary a smith. Strong backs, might be, but they won’t do as they are told. And us with all these ruins to turn back into forts. Can’t be done, my lord. I tell you true. It can’t be done.”

“It will be done,” said Jon, “or they will live in ruins.”

A lord needed men about him he could rely upon for honest counsel. Marsh and Yarwyck were no lickspittles, and that was to the good ... but they were seldom any *help* either. More and more, he found he knew what they would say before he asked them.

Especially when it concerned the free folk, where their disapproval went bone deep. When Jon settled Stonedoor on Soren Shieldbreaker, Yarwyck complained that it was too isolated. How could they know what mischief Soren might get up to, off in those hills? When he conferred Oakenshield on Tormund Giantsbane and Queensgate on Morna White Mask, Marsh pointed out that Castle Black would now have foes on either side who could easily cut them off from the rest of the Wall. As for Borroq, Othell Yarwyck claimed the woods north of Stonedoor were full of wild boars. Who was to say the skinchanger would not make his own pig army?

Hoarfrost Hill and Rimegate still lacked garrisons, so Jon had asked their views on which of the remaining wildling chiefs and war lords might be best suited to hold them. “We have Brogg, Gavin the Trader, the Great Walrus ... Howd Wanderer walks alone, Tormund says, but there’s still Harle the Huntsman, Harle the Handsome, Blind Doss ... Ygon Old-father commands a following, but most are his owns sons and grandsons. He has eighteen wives, half of them stolen on raids. Which of these ...”

“None,” Bowen Marsh had said. “I know all these men by their deeds. We should be fitting them for nooses, not giving them our castles.”

“Aye,” Othell Yarwyck had agreed. “Bad and worse and worst makes a beggar’s choice. My lord had as well present us with a pack of wolves and ask which we’d like to tear our throats out.”

It was the same again with Hardhome. Satin poured whilst Jon told them of his audience with the queen. Marsh listened attentively, ignoring the mulled wine, whilst Yarwyck drank one cup and then another. But no sooner had Jon finished than the Lord Steward said, “Her Grace is wise. Let them die.”

Jon sat back. “Is that the only counsel you can offer, my lord? Tormund is bringing eighty men. How many should we send? Shall we call upon the giants? The spearwives at Long Barrow? If we have women with us, it may put Mother Mole’s people at ease.”

“Send women, then. Send giants. Send suckling babes. Is that what my lord wishes to hear?” Bowen Marsh rubbed at the scar he had won at the Bridge of Skulls. “Send them all. The more we lose, the fewer mouths we’ll have to feed.”

Yarwyck was no more helpful. “If the wildlings at Hardhome need saving, let the wildlings here go save them. Tormund knows the way to Hard-home. To hear him talk, he can save them all himself with his huge member.”

This was pointless, Jon thought. *Pointless, fruitless, hopeless*. “Thank you for your counsel, my lords.”

Satin helped them back into their cloaks. As they walked through the armory, Ghost sniffed at them, his tail upraised and bristling. *My brothers*. The Night’s Watch needed leaders with the wisdom of Maester Aemon, the learning of Samwell Tarly, the courage of Qhorin Halfhand, the stubborn strength of the Old Bear, the compassion of Donal Noye. What it had instead was them.

The snow was falling heavily outside. “Wind’s from the south,” Yarwyck observed. “It’s blowing the snow right up against the Wall. See?”

He was right. The switchback stair was buried almost to the first landing, Jon saw, and the wooden doors of the ice cells and storerooms had vanished behind a wall of white. “How many men do we have in ice cells?” he asked Bowen Marsh.

“Four living men. Two dead ones.”

The corpses. Jon had almost forgotten them. He had hoped to learn something from the bodies they’d brought back from the weirwood grove, but the dead men had stubbornly remained dead. “We need to dig those cells out.”

“Ten stewards and ten spades should do it,” said Marsh.

“Use Wun Wun too.”

“As you command.”

Ten stewards and one giant made short work of the drifts, but even when the doors were clear again, Jon was not satisfied. “Those cells will be buried again by morning. We’d best move the prisoners before they smother.”

“Karstark too, m’lord?” asked Fulk the Flea. “Can’t we just leave that one shivering till spring?”

“Would that we could.” Cregan Karstark had taken to howling in the night of late, and throwing frozen feces at whoever came to feed him. That had not made him beloved of his guards. “Take him to the Lord Commander’s Tower. The undervault should hold him.” Though partly collapsed, the Old Bear’s former seat would be warmer than the ice cells. Its subcellars were largely intact.

Cregan kicked at the guards when they came through the door, twisted and shoved when they grabbed him, even tried to bite them. But the cold had weakened him, and Jon’s men were bigger, younger, and stronger. They hauled him out, still struggling, and dragged him through thigh-high snow to his new home.

“What would the lord commander like us to do with his corpses?” asked Marsh when the living men had been moved.

“Leave them.” If the storm entombed them, well and good. He would need to burn them eventually, no doubt, but for the nonce they were bound with iron chains inside their cells. That, and being dead, should suffice to hold them harmless.

Tormund Giantsbane timed his arrival perfectly, thundering up with his warriors when all the shoveling was done. Only fifty seemed to have turned up, not the eighty Toregg promised Leathers, but Tormund was not called

Tall-Talker for naught. The wildling arrived red-faced, shouting for a horn of ale and something hot to eat. He had ice in his beard and more crusting his mustache.

Someone had already told the Thunderfist about Gerrick Kingsblood and his new style. “King o’ the Wildlings?” Tormund roared. “Har! King o’ My Hairy Butt Crack, more like.”

“He has a regal look to him,” Jon said. “He has a little red cock to go with all that red hair, that’s what he has. Raymund Redbeard and his sons died at Long Lake, thanks to your bloody Starks and the Drunken Giant. Not the little brother. Ever wonder why they called him the Red Raven?” Tormund’s mouth split in a gap-toothed grin. “First to fly the battle, he was. ’Twas a song about it, after. The singer had to find a rhyme for *craven*, so ...” He wiped his nose. “If your queen’s knights want those girls o’ his, they’re welcome to them.”

“*Girls*,” squawked Mormont’s raven. “*Girls, girls*.”

That set Tormund to laughing all over again. “Now there’s a bird with sense. How much do you want for him, Snow? I gave you a son, the least you could do is give me the bloody bird.”

“I would,” said Jon, “but like as not you’d eat him.”

Tormund roared at that as well. “*Eat*,” the raven said darkly, flapping its black wings. “*Corn? Corn? Corn?*”

“We need to talk about the ranging,” said Jon. “I want us to be of one mind at the Shieldhall, we must—” He broke off when Mully poked his nose inside the door, grim-faced, to announce that Clydas had brought a letter.

“Tell him to leave it with you. I will read it later.”

“As you say, m’lord, only ... Clydas don’t look his proper self ... he’s more white than pink, if you get my meaning ... and he’s shaking.”

“Dark wings, dark words,” muttered Tormund. “Isn’t that what you kneelers say?”

“We say, *Bleed a cold but feast a fever too*,” Jon told him. “We say, *Never drink with Dornishmen when the moon is full*. We say a lot of things.”

Mully added his two groats. “My old grandmother always used to say, *Summer friends will melt away like summer snows, but winter friends are friends forever*.”

“I think that’s sufficient wisdom for the moment,” said Jon Snow. “Show Clydas in if you would be so good.”

Mully had not been wrong; the old steward *was* trembling, his face as pale as the snows outside. “I am being foolish, Lord Commander, but ... this letter frightens me. See here?”

Bastard, was the only word written outside the scroll. No *Lord Snow* or *Jon Snow* or *Lord Commander*. Simply *Bastard*. And the letter was sealed with a smear of hard pink wax. “You were right to come at once,” Jon said. *You were right to be afraid*. He cracked the seal, flattened the parchment, and read.

bq.

Your false king is dead, bastard. He and all his host were smashed in seven days of battle. I have his magic sword. Tell his red whore.

Your false king’s friends are dead. Their heads upon the walls of Winterfell. Come see them, bastard. Your false king lied, and so did you. You told the world you burned the King-Beyond-the-Wall. Instead you sent him to Winterfell to steal my bride from me.

I will have my bride back. If you want Mance Rayder back, come and get him. I have him in a cage for all the north to see, proof of your lies. The cage is cold, but I have made him a warm cloak from the skins of the six whores who came with him to Winterfell.

I want my bride back. I want the false king's queen. I want his daughter and his red witch. I want his wildling princess.

I want his little prince, the wildling babe. And I want my Reek. Send them to me, bastard, and I will not trouble you or your black crows. Keep them from me, and I will cut out your bastard's heart and eat it.

It was signed,

Ramsay Bolton,

Trueborn Lord of Winterfell.

“Snow?” said Tormund Giantsbane. “You look like your father’s bloody head just rolled out o’ that paper.”

Jon Snow did not answer at once. “Mully, help Clydas back to his chambers. The night is dark, and the paths will be slippery with snow. Satin, go with them.” He handed Tormund Giantsbane the letter. “Here, see for yourself.”

The wildling gave the letter a dubious look and handed it right back. “Feels nasty ... but Tormund Thunderfist had better things to do than learn to make papers talk at him. They never have any good to say, now do they?”

“Not often,” Jon Snow admitted. *Dark wings, dark words.* Perhaps there was more truth to those wise old sayings than he’d known. “It was sent by Ramsay Snow. I’ll read you what he wrote.”

When he was done, Tormund whistled. “Har. That’s bugged, and no mistake. What was that about Mance? Has him in a cage, does he? How, when hundreds saw your red witch burn the man?”

That was Rattleshirt, Jon almost said. *That was sorcery. A glamor, she called it.* “Melisandre ... *look to the skies*, she said.” He set the letter down. “A raven in a storm. She saw this coming.” *When you have your answers, send to me.*

“Might be all a skin o’ lies.” Tormund scratched under his beard. “If I had me a nice goose quill and a pot o’ maester’s ink, I could write down that me member was long and thick as me arm, wouldn’t make it so.”

“He has Lightbringer. He talks of heads upon the walls of Winterfell. He knows about the spearwives and their number.” *He knows about Mance Rayder.* “No. There is truth in there.”

“I won’t say you’re wrong. What do you mean to do, crow?”

Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand. *The Night’s Watch takes no part.* He closed his fist and opened it again. *What you propose is nothing less than treason.* He thought of Robb, with snowflakes melting in his hair. *Kill the boy and let the man be born.* He thought of Bran, clambering up a tower wall, agile as a monkey. Of Rickon’s breathless laughter. Of Sansa, brushing out Lady’s coat and singing to herself. *You know nothing, Jon Snow.* He thought of Arya, her hair as tangled as a bird’s nest. *I made him a warm cloak from the skins of the six whores who came with him to Winterfell ... I want my bride back ... I want my bride back ... I want my bride back ...*

“I think we had best change the plan,” Jon Snow said.

They talked for the best part of two hours.

Horse and Rory had replaced Fulk and Mully at the armory door with the change of watch. “With me,” Jon told them, when the time came. Ghost would have followed as well, but as the wolf came padding after them, Jon grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and wrestled him back inside. Borroq might be amongst those gathering at the Shieldhall. The last thing he needed just now was his wolf savaging the skinchanger’s boar.

The Shieldhall was one of the older parts of Castle Black, a long drafty feast hall of dark stone, its oaken rafters black with the smoke of centuries. Back when the Night’s Watch had been much larger, its walls had been hung with rows of brightly colored wooden shields. Then as now, when a knight took the black, tradition decreed that he set aside his former arms

and take up the plain black shield of the brotherhood. The shields thus discarded would hang in the Shieldhall.

Hundreds of knights meant hundreds of shields. Hawks and eagles, dragons and griffins, suns and stags, wolves and wyverns, manticores, bulls, trees and flowers, harps, spears, crabs and krakens, red lions and golden lions and chequy lions, owls, lambs, maids and mermen, stallions, stars, buckets and buckles, flayed men and hanged men and burning men, axes, longswords, turtles, unicorns, bears, quills, spiders and snakes and scorpions, and a hundred other heraldic charges had adorned the Shieldhall walls, blazoned in more colors than any rainbow ever dreamed of.

But when a knight died, his shield was taken down, that it might go with him to his pyre or his tomb, and over the years and centuries fewer and fewer knights had taken the black. A day came when it no longer made sense for the knights of Castle Black to dine apart. The Shieldhall was abandoned. In the last hundred years, it had been used only infrequently. As a dining hall, it left much to be desired—it was dark, dirty, drafty, and hard to heat in winter, its cellars infested with rats, its massive wooden rafters worm-eaten and festooned with cobwebs.

But it was large and long enough to seat two hundred, and half again that many if they crowded close. When Jon and Tormund entered, a sound went through the hall, like wasps stirring in a nest. The wildlings outnumbered the crows by five to one, judging by how little black he saw. Fewer than a dozen shields remained, sad grey things with faded paint and long cracks in the wood. But fresh torches burned in the iron sconces along the walls, and Jon had ordered benches and tables brought in. Men with comfortable seats were more inclined to listen, Maester Aemon had once told him; standing men were more inclined to shout.

At the top of the hall a sagging platform stood. Jon mounted it, with Tormund Giantsbane at his side, and raised his hands for quiet. The wasps only buzzed the louder. Then Tormund put his warhorn to his lips and blew a blast. The sound filled the hall, echoing off the rafters overhead. Silence fell.

“I summoned you to make plans for the relief of Hardhome,” Jon Snow began. “Thousands of the free folk are gathered there, trapped and starving, and we have had reports of dead things in the wood.” To his left he saw Marsh and Yarwyck. Othell was surrounded by his builders, whilst Bowen had Wick Whittlestick, Left Hand Lew, and Alf of Runnymudd beside him. To his right, Soren Shieldbreaker sat with his arms crossed against his chest. Farther back, Jon saw Gavin the Trader and Harle the Handsome whispering together. Ygon Oldfather sat amongst his wives, Howd Wanderer alone. Borroq leaned against a wall in a dark corner. Mercifully, his boar was nowhere in evidence. “The ships I sent to take off Mother Mole and her people have been wracked by storms. We must send what help we can by land or let them die.” Two of Queen Selyse’s knights had come as well, Jon saw. Ser Narbert and Ser Benethon stood near the door at the foot of the hall. But the rest of the queen’s men were conspicuous in their absence. “I had hoped to lead the ranging myself and bring back as many of the free folk as could survive the journey.” A flash of red in the back of the hall caught Jon’s eye. Lady Melisandre had arrived. “But now I find I cannot go to Hardhome. The ranging will be led by Tormund Giantsbane, known to you all. I have promised him as many men as he requires.”

“*And where will you be, crow?*” Borroq thundered. “Hiding here in Castle Black with your white dog?”

“No. I ride south.” Then Jon read them the letter Ramsay Snow had written.

The Shieldhall went mad.

Every man began to shout at once. They leapt to their feet, shaking fists. *So much for the calming power of comfortable benches.* Swords were brandished, axes smashed against shields. Jon Snow looked to Tormund. The Giantsbane sounded his horn once more, twice as long and twice as loud as the first time.

“The Night’s Watch takes no part in the wars of the Seven Kingdoms,” Jon reminded them when some semblance of quiet had returned. “It is not for us to oppose the Bastard of Bolton, to avenge Stannis Baratheon, to defend his widow and his daughter. This *creature* who makes cloaks from the skins of

women has sworn to cut my heart out, and I mean to make him answer for those words ... but I will not ask my brothers to forswear their vows.

“The Night’s Watch will make for Hardhome. I ride to Winterfell alone, unless ...” Jon paused. “... is there any man here who will come stand with me?”

The roar was all he could have hoped for, the tumult so loud that the two old shields tumbled from the walls. Soren Shieldbreaker was on his feet, the Wanderer as well. Toregg the Tall, Brogg, Harle the Huntsman and Harle the Handsome both, Ygon Oldfather, Blind Doss, even the Great Walrus. *I have my swords*, thought Jon Snow, *and we are coming for you, Bastard.*

Yarwyck and Marsh were slipping out, he saw, and all their men behind them. It made no matter. He did not need them now. He did not *want* them. *No man can ever say I made my brothers break their vows. If this is oathbreaking, the crime is mine and mine alone.* Then Tormund was pounding him on the back, all gap-toothed grin from ear to ear. “Well spoken, crow. Now bring out the mead! Make them yours and get them drunk, that’s how it’s done. We’ll make a wildling o’ you yet, boy. Har!”

“I will send for ale,” Jon said, distracted. Melisandre was gone, he realized, and so were the queen’s knights. *I should have gone to Selyse first.*

She has the right to know her lord is dead. “You must excuse me. I’ll leave you to get them drunk.”

“Har! A task I’m well suited for, crow. On your way!”

Horse and Rory fell in beside Jon as he left the Shieldhall. *I should talk with Melisandre after I see the queen*, he thought. *If she could see a raven in a storm, she can find Ramsay Snow for me.* Then he heard the shouting ... and a roar so loud it seemed to shake the Wall. “That come from Hardin’s Tower, m’lord,” Horse reported. He might have said more, but the scream cut him off.

Val, was Jon’s first thought. But that was no woman’s scream. *That is a man in mortal agony.* He broke into a run. Horse and Rory raced after him. “Is it

wights?” asked Rory. Jon wondered. Could his corpses have escaped their chains?

The screaming had stopped by the time they came to Hardin’s Tower, but Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun was still roaring. The giant was dangling a bloody corpse by one leg, the same way Arya used to dangle her doll when she was small, swinging it like a morningstar when menaced by vegetables. *Arya never tore her dolls to pieces, though.* The dead man’s sword arm was yards away, the snow beneath it turning red.

“Let him go,” Jon shouted. “Wun Wun, *let him go.*”

Wun Wun did not hear or did not understand. The giant was bleeding himself, with sword cuts on his belly and his arm. He swung the dead knight against the grey stone of the tower, again and again and again, until the man’s head was red and pulpy as a summer melon. The knight’s cloak flapped in the cold air. Of white wool it had been, bordered in cloth-of-silver and patterned with blue stars. Blood and bone were flying everywhere.

Men poured from the surrounding keeps and towers. Northmen, free folk, queen’s men ... “Form a line,” Jon Snow commanded them. “Keep them back. Everyone, but especially the queen’s men.” The dead man was Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain; his head was largely gone, but his heraldry was as distinctive as his face. Jon did not want to risk Ser Malegorn or Ser Brus or any of the queen’s other knights trying to avenge him.

Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun howled again and gave Ser Patrek’s other arm a twist and pull. It tore loose from his shoulder with a spray of bright red blood. *Like a child pulling petals off a daisy*, thought Jon. “Leathers, talk to him, calm him. The Old Tongue, he understands the Old Tongue. *Keep back*, the rest of you. Put away your steel, we’re scaring him.” Couldn’t they see the giant had been cut? Jon had to put an end to this or more men would die. They had no idea of Wun Wun’s strength. *A horn, I need a horn.* He saw the glint of steel, turned toward it. “*No blades!*” he screamed. “Wick, put that knife ...”

... *away*, he meant to say. When Wick Whittlestick slashed at his throat, the word turned into a grunt. Jon twisted from the knife, just enough so it barely grazed his skin. *He cut me*. When he put his hand to the side of his neck, blood welled between his fingers. “*Why?*”

“For the Watch.” Wick slashed at him again. This time Jon caught his wrist and bent his arm back until he dropped the dagger. The gangling steward backed away, his hands upraised as if to say, *Not me, it was not me*. Men were screaming. Jon reached for Longclaw, but his fingers had grown stiff and clumsy. Somehow he could not seem to get the sword free of its scabbard.

Then Bowen Marsh stood there before him, tears running down his cheeks. “For the Watch.” He punched Jon in the belly. When he pulled his hand away, the dagger stayed where he had buried it.

Jon fell to his knees. He found the dagger’s hilt and wrenched it free. In the cold night air the wound was smoking. “Ghost,” he whispered. Pain washed over him. *Stick them with the pointy end*. When the third dagger took him between the shoulder blades, he gave a grunt and fell face-first into the snow. He never felt the fourth knife. Only the cold ...