

JON

The white wolf raced through a black wood, beneath a pale cliff as tall as the sky. The moon ran with him, slipping through a tangle of bare branches overhead, across the starry sky.

“Snow,” the moon murmured. The wolf made no answer. Snow crunched beneath his paws. The wind sighed through the trees.

Far off, he could hear his packmates calling to him, like to like. They were hunting too. A wild rain lashed down upon his black brother as he tore at the flesh of an enormous goat, washing the blood from his side where the goat’s long horn had raked him. In another place, his little sister lifted her head to sing to the moon, and a hundred small grey cousins broke off their hunt to sing with her. The hills were warmer where they were, and full of food. Many a night his sister’s pack gorged on the flesh of sheep and cows and horses, the prey of men, and sometimes even on the flesh of man himself.

“Snow,” the moon called down again, cackling. The white wolf padded along the man trail beneath the icy cliff. The taste of blood was on his tongue, and his ears rang to the song of the hundred cousins. Once they had been six, five whimpering blind in the snow beside their dead mother, sucking cool milk from her hard dead nipples whilst he crawled off alone. Four remained ... and one the white wolf could no longer sense.

“Snow,” the moon insisted.

The white wolf ran from it, racing toward the cave of night where the sun had hidden, his breath frosting in the air. On starless nights the great cliff was as black as stone, a darkness towering high above the wide world, but when the moon came out it shimmered pale and icy as a frozen stream. The wolf’s pelt was thick and shaggy, but when the wind blew along the ice no fur could keep the chill out. On the other side the wind was colder still, the wolf sensed. That was where his brother was, the grey brother who smelled of summer.

“Snow.” An icicle tumbled from a branch. The white wolf turned and bared his teeth. “*Snow!*” His fur rose bristling, as the woods dissolved around him. “*Snow, snow, snow!*” He heard the beat of wings. Through the gloom a raven flew.

It landed on Jon Snow’s chest with a *thump* and a scrabbling of claws. “*SNOW!*” it screamed into his face.

“I hear you.” The room was dim, his pallet hard. Grey light leaked through the shutters, promising another bleak cold day. “Is this how you woke Mormont? Get your feathers out of my face.” Jon wriggled an arm out from under his blankets to shoo the raven off. It was a big bird, old and bold and scruffy, utterly without fear. “*Snow,*” it cried, flapping to his bedpost. “*Snow, snow.*” Jon filled his fist with a pillow and let fly, but the bird took to the air. The pillow struck the wall and burst, scattering stuffing everywhere just as Dolorous Edd Tollett poked his head through the door. “Beg pardon,” he said, ignoring the flurry of feathers, “shall I fetch m’lord some breakfast?”

“*Corn,*” cried the raven. “*Corn, corn.*”

“Roast raven,” Jon suggested. “And half a pint of ale.” Having a steward fetch and serve for him still felt strange; not long ago, it would have been him fetching breakfast for Lord Commander Mormont.

“Three corns and one roast raven,” said Dolorous Edd. “Very good, m’lord, only Hobb’s made boiled eggs, black sausage, and apples stewed with prunes. The apples stewed with prunes are excellent, except for the prunes. I won’t eat prunes myself. Well, there was one time when Hobb chopped them up with chestnuts and carrots and hid them in a hen. Never trust a cook, my lord. They’ll prune you when you least expect it.”

“Later.” Breakfast could wait; Stannis could not. “Any trouble from the stockades last night?”

“Not since you put guards on the guards, m’lord.”

“Good.” A thousand wildlings had been penned up beyond the Wall, the captives Stannis Baratheon had taken when his knights had smashed Mance Rayder’s patchwork host. Many of the prisoners were women, and some of the guards had been sneaking them out to warm their beds. King’s men, queen’s men, it did not seem to matter; a few black brothers had tried the same thing. Men were men, and these were the only women for a thousand leagues.

“Two more wildlings turned up to surrender,” Edd went on. “A mother with a girl clinging to her skirts. She had a boy babe too, all swaddled up in fur, but he was dead.”

“*Dead*,” said the raven. It was one of the bird’s favorite words. “*Dead, dead, dead.*”

They had free folk drifting in most every night, starved half-frozen creatures who had run from the battle beneath the Wall only to crawl back when they realized there was no safe place to run to. “Was the mother questioned?” Jon asked. Stannis Baratheon had smashed Mance Rayder’s host and made the King-Beyond-the-Wall his captive ... but the wildlings were still out there, the Weeper and Tormund Giantsbane and thousands more.

“Aye, m’lord,” said Edd, “but all she knows is that she ran off during the battle and hid in the woods after. We filled her full of porridge, sent her to the pens, and burned the babe.”

Burning dead children had ceased to trouble Jon Snow; live ones were another matter. *Two kings to wake the dragon. The father first and then the son, so both die kings.* The words had been murmured by one of the queen’s men as Maester Aemon had cleaned his wounds. Jon had tried to dismiss them as his fever talking. Aemon had demurred. “There is power in a king’s blood,” the old maester had warned, “and better men than Stannis have done worse things than this.” *The king can be harsh and unforgiving, aye, but a babe still on the breast? Only a monster would give a living child to the flames.*

Jon pissed in darkness, filling his chamber pot as the Old Bear's raven muttered complaints. The wolf dreams had been growing stronger, and he found himself remembering them even when awake. *Ghost knows that Grey Wind is dead.* Robb had died at the Twins, betrayed by men he'd believed his friends, and his wolf had perished with him. Bran and Rickon had been murdered too, beheaded at the behest of Theon Greyjoy, who had once been their lord father's ward ... but if dreams did not lie, their direwolves had escaped. At Queenscrown, one had come out of the darkness to save Jon's life. *Summer, it had to be. His fur was grey, and Shaggydog is black.* He wondered if some part of his dead brothers lived on inside their wolves.

He filled his basin from the flagon of water beside his bed, washed his face and hands, donned a clean set of black woolens, laced up a black leather jerkin, and pulled on a pair of well-worn boots. Mormont's raven watched with shrewd black eyes, then fluttered to the window. "Do you take me for your thrall?" When Jon folded back the window with its thick diamond-shaped panes of yellow glass, the chill of the morning hit him in the face. He took a breath to clear away the cobwebs of the night as the raven flapped away. *That bird is too clever by half.* It had been the Old Bear's companion for long years, but that had not stopped it from eating Mormont's face once he died.

Outside his bedchamber a flight of steps descended to a larger room furnished with a scarred pinewood table and a dozen oak-and-leather chairs. With Stannis in the King's Tower and the Lord Commander's Tower burned to a shell, Jon had established himself in Donal Noye's modest rooms behind the armory. In time, no doubt, he would need larger quarters, but for the moment these would serve whilst he accustomed himself to command.

The grant that the king had presented him for signature was on the table beneath a silver drinking cup that had once been Donal Noye's. The one-armed smith had left few personal effects: the cup, six pennies and a copper star, a niello brooch with a broken clasp, a musty brocade doublet that bore the stag of Storm's End. *His treasures were his tools, and the swords and knives he made. His life was at the forge.* Jon moved the cup aside and read the parchment once again. *If I put my seal to this, I will forever be*

remembered as the lord commander who gave away the Wall, he thought, but if I should refuse ...

Stannis Baratheon was proving to be a prickly guest, and a restless one. He had ridden down the kingsroad almost as far as Queenscrown, prowled through the empty hovels of Mole's Town, inspected the ruined forts at Queensgate and Oakenshield. Each night he walked atop the Wall with Lady Melisandre, and during the days he visited the stockades, picking captives out for the red woman to question. *He does not like to be balked.* This would not be a pleasant morning, Jon feared.

From the armory came a clatter of shields and swords, as the latest lot of boys and raw recruits armed themselves. He could hear the voice of Iron Emmett telling them to be quick about it. Cotter Pyke had not been pleased to lose him, but the young ranger had a gift for training men. *He loves to fight, and he'll teach his boys to love it too.* Or so he hoped.

Jon's cloak hung on a peg by the door, his sword belt on another. He donned them both and made his way to the armory. The rug where Ghost slept was empty, he saw. Two guardsmen stood inside the doors, clad in black cloaks and iron halfhelms, spears in their hands. "Will m'lord be wanting a tail?" asked Garse.

"I think I can find the King's Tower by myself." Jon hated having guards trailing after him everywhere he went. It made him feel like a mother duck leading a procession of ducklings.

Iron Emmett's lads were well at it in the yard, blunted swords slamming into shields and ringing against one another. Jon stopped to watch a moment as Horse pressed Hop-Robin back toward the well. Horse had the makings of a good fighter, he decided. He was strong and getting stronger, and his instincts were sound. Hop-Robin was another tale. His clubfoot was bad enough, but he was afraid of getting hit as well. *Perhaps we can make a steward of him.* The fight ended abruptly, with Hop-Robin on the ground.

"Well fought," Jon said to Horse, "but you drop your shield too low when pressing an attack. You will want to correct that, or it is like to get you killed."

“Yes, m’lord. I’ll keep it higher next time.” Horse pulled Hop-Robin to his feet, and the smaller boy made a clumsy bow.

A few of Stannis’s knights were sparring on the far side of the yard. *King’s men in one corner and queen’s men in another*, Jon did not fail to note, *but only a few. It’s too cold for most of them.* As he strode past them, a booming voice called after him. “BOY! YOU THERE! *BOY!*”

Boy was not the worst of the things that Jon Snow had been called since being chosen lord commander. He ignored it.

“*Snow*,” the voice insisted, “*Lord Commander.*”

This time he stopped. “Ser?”

The knight overtopped him by six inches. “A man who bears Valyrian steel should use it for more than scratching his arse.”

Jon had seen this one about the castle—a knight of great renown, to hear him tell it. During the battle beneath the Wall, Ser Godry Farring had slain a fleeing giant, pounding after him on horseback and driving a lance through his back, then dismounting to hack off the creature’s pitiful small head. The queen’s men had taken to calling him Godry the Giantslayer.

Jon remembered Ygritte, crying. *I am the last of the giants.* “I use Longclaw when I must, ser.”

“How well, though?” Ser Godry drew his own blade. “Show us. I promise not to hurt you, lad.”

How kind of you. “Some other time, ser. I fear that I have other duties just now.”

“You fear. I see that.” Ser Godry grinned at his friends. “He fears,” he repeated, for the slow ones.

“You will excuse me.” Jon showed them his back.

Castle Black seemed a bleak and forlorn place in the pale dawn light. *My command*, Jon Snow reflected ruefully, *as much a ruin as it is a stronghold*. The Lord Commander's Tower was a shell, the Common Hall a pile of blackened timbers, and Hardin's Tower looked as if the next gust of wind would knock it over ... though it had looked that way for years. Behind them rose the Wall: immense, forbidding, frigid, acrawl with builders pushing up a new switchback stair to join the remnants of the old. They worked from dawn to dusk. Without the stair, there was no way to reach the top of the Wall save by winch. That would not serve if the wildlings should attack again.

Above the King's Tower the great golden battle standard of House Baratheon cracked like a whip from the roof where Jon Snow had prowled with bow in hand not long ago, slaying Thenns and free folk beside Satin and Deaf Dick Follard. Two queen's men stood shivering on the steps, their hands tucked up into their armpits and their spears leaning against the door. "Those cloth gloves will never serve," Jon told them. "See Bowen Marsh on the morrow, and he'll give you each a pair of leather gloves lined with fur."

"We will, m'lord, and thank you," said the older guard.

"That's if our bloody hands aren't froze off," the younger added, his breath a pale mist. "I used to think that it got cold up in the Dornish Marches. What did I know?"

Nothing, thought Jon Snow, *the same as me*.

Halfway up the winding steps, he came upon Samwell Tarly, headed down. "Are you coming from the king?" Jon asked him.

"Maester Aemon sent me with a letter."

"I see." Some lords trusted their maesters to read their letters and convey the contents, but Stannis insisted on breaking the seals himself. "How did Stannis take it?"

“Not happily, by his face.” Sam dropped his voice to a whisper. “I am not supposed to speak of it.”

“Then don’t.” Jon wondered which of his father’s bannermen had refused King Stannis homage this time. *He was quick enough to spread the word when Karhold declared for him.* “How are you and your longbow getting on?”

“I found a good book about archery.” Sam frowned. “Doing it is harder than reading about it, though. I get blisters.”

“Keep at it. We may need your bow on the Wall if the Others turn up some dark night.”

“Oh, I hope not.”

More guards stood outside the king’s solar. “No arms are allowed in His Grace’s presence, my lord,” their serjeant said. “I’ll need that sword. Your knives as well.” It would do no good to protest, Jon knew. He handed them his weaponry.

Within the solar the air was warm. Lady Melisandre was seated near the fire, her ruby glimmering against the pale skin of her throat. Ygritte had been kissed by fire; the red priestess *was* fire, and her hair was blood and flame. Stannis stood behind the rough-hewn table where the Old Bear had once been wont to sit and take his meals. Covering the table was a large map of the north, painted on a ragged piece of hide. A tallow candle weighed down one end of it, a steel gauntlet the other.

The king wore lambswool breeches and a quilted doublet, yet somehow he looked as stiff and uncomfortable as if he had been clad in plate and mail. His skin was pale leather, his beard cropped so short that it might have been painted on. A fringe about his temples was all that remained of his black hair. In his hand was a parchment with a broken seal of dark green wax.

Jon took a knee. The king frowned at him, and rattled the parchment angrily. “Rise. Tell me, who is *Lyanna Mormont*?”

“One of Lady Maege’s daughters, Sire. The youngest. She was named for my lord father’s sister.”

“To curry your lord father’s favor, I don’t doubt. I know how that game is played. How old is this wretched girl child?”

Jon had to think a moment. “Ten. Or near enough to make no matter. Might I know how she has offended Your Grace?”

Stannis read from the letter. “*Bear Island knows no king but the King in the North, whose name is STARK.* A girl of ten, you say, and she presumes to scold her lawful king.” His close-cropped beard lay like a shadow over his hollow cheeks. “See that you keep these tidings to yourself, Lord Snow. Karhold is with me, that is all the men need know. I will not have your brothers trading tales of how this child spat on me.”

“As you command, Sire.” Maege Mormont had ridden south with Robb, Jon knew. Her eldest daughter had joined the Young Wolf’s host as well. Even if both of them had died, however, Lady Maege had other daughters, some with children of their own. Had they gone with Robb as well? Surely Lady Maege would have left at least one of the older girls behind as castellan. He did not understand why Lyanna should be writing Stannis, and could not help but wonder if the girl’s answer might have been different if the letter had been sealed with a direwolf instead of a crowned stag, and signed by Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell. *It is too late for such misgivings. You made your choice.*

“Two score ravens were sent out,” the king complained, “yet we get no response but silence and defiance. Homage is the duty every leal subject owes his king. Yet your father’s bannermen all turn their back on me, save the Karstarks. Is Arnolf Karstark the only man of honor in the north?”

Arnolf Karstark was the late Lord Rickard’s uncle. He had been made the castellan of Karhold when his nephew and his sons went south with Robb, and he had been the first to respond to King Stannis’s call for homage, with a raven declaring his allegiance. *The Karstarks have no other choice*, Jon might have said. Rickard Karstark had betrayed the direwolf and spilled the blood of lions. The stag was Karhold’s only hope. “In times as confused as

these, even men of honor must wonder where their duty lies. Your Grace is not the only king in the realm demanding homage.”

Lady Melisandre stirred. “Tell me, Lord Snow ... where were these other kings when the wild people stormed your Wall?”

“A thousand leagues away and deaf to our need,” Jon replied. “I have not forgotten that, my lady. Nor will I. But my father’s bannermen have wives and children to protect, and smallfolk who will die should they choose wrongly. His Grace asks much of them. Give them time, and you will have your answers.”

“Answers such as this?” Stannis crushed Lyanna’s letter in his fist.

“Even in the north men fear the wroth of Tywin Lannister. Boltons make bad enemies as well. It is not happenstance that put a flayed man on their banners. They north rode with Robb, bled with him, died for him. They have supped on grief and death, and now you come to offer them another serving. Do you blame them if they hang back? Forgive me, Your Grace, but some will look at you and see only another doomed pretender.”

“If His Grace is doomed, your realm is doomed as well,” said Lady Melisandre. “Remember that, Lord Snow. It is the one true king of Westeros who stands before you.”

Jon kept his face a mask. “As you say, my lady.”

Stannis snorted. “You spend your words as if every one were a golden dragon. I wonder, how much gold do you have laid by?”

“Gold?” *Are those the dragons the red woman means to wake? Dragons made of gold?* “Such taxes as we collect are paid in kind, Your Grace. The Watch is rich in turnips but poor in coin.”

“Turnips are not like to appease Salladhor Saan. I require gold or silver.”

“For that, you need White Harbor. The city cannot compare to Old-town or King’s Landing, but it is still a thriving port. Lord Manderly is the richest of

my lord father's bannermen."

"Lord Too-Fat-to-Sit-a-Horse." The letter that Lord Wyman Manderly had sent back from White Harbor had spoken of his age and infirmity, and little more. Stannis had commanded Jon not to speak of that one either.

"Perhaps his lordship would fancy a wildling wife," said Lady Melisandre. "Is this fat man married, Lord Snow?"

"His lady wife is long dead. Lord Wyman has two grown sons, and grandchildren by the elder. And he *is* too fat to sit a horse, thirty stone at least. Val would never have him."

"Just once you might try to give me an answer that would please me, Lord Snow," the king grumbled.

"I would hope the truth would please you, Sire. Your men call Val a princess, but to the free folk she is only the sister of their king's dead wife. If you force her to marry a man she does not want, she is like to slit his throat on their wedding night. Even if she accepts her husband, that does not mean the wildlings will follow him, or you. The only man who can bind them to your cause is Mance Rayder."

"I know that," Stannis said, unhappily. "I have spent hours speaking with the man. He knows much and more of our true enemy, and there is cunning in him, I'll grant you. Even if he were to renounce his kingship, though, the man remains an oathbreaker. Suffer one deserter to live, and you encourage others to desert. No. Laws should be made of iron, not of pudding. Mance Rayder's life is forfeit by every law of the Seven Kingdoms."

"The law ends at the Wall, Your Grace. You could make good use of Mance."

"I mean to. I'll *burn* him, and the north will see how I deal with turncloaks and traitors. I have other men to lead the wildlings. And I have Rayder's son, do not forget. Once the father dies, his whelp will be the King-Beyond-the-Wall."

“Your Grace is mistaken.” *You know nothing, Jon Snow*, Ygritte used to say, but he had learned. “The babe is no more a prince than Val is a princess. You do not become King-Beyond-the-Wall because your father was.”

“Good,” said Stannis, “for I will suffer no other kings in Westeros. Have you signed the grant?”

“No, Your Grace.” *And now it comes*. Jon closed his burned fingers and opened them again. “You ask too much.”

“*Ask? I asked* you to be Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. I *require* these castles.”

“We have ceded you the Nightfort.”

“Rats and ruins. It is a niggard’s gift that costs the giver nothing. Your own man Yarwyck says it will be half a year before the castle can be made fit for habitation.”

“The other forts are no better.”

“I know that. It makes no matter. They are all we have. There are nineteen forts along the Wall, and you have men in only three of them. I mean to have every one of them garrisoned again before the year is out.”

“I have no quarrel with that, Sire, but it is being said that you also mean to grant these castles to your knights and lords, to hold as their own seats as vassals to Your Grace.”

“Kings are expected to be open-handed to their followers. Did Lord Eddard teach his bastard nothing? Many of my knights and lords abandoned rich lands and stout castles in the south. Should their loyalty go unrewarded?”

“If Your Grace wishes to lose all of my lord father’s bannermen, there is no more certain way than by giving northern halls to southron lords.”

“How can I lose men I do not have? I had hoped to bestow Winterfell on a northman, you may recall. A son of Eddard Stark. He threw my offer in my

face.” Stannis Baratheon with a grievance was like a mastiff with a bone; he gnawed it down to splinters.

“By right Winterfell should go to my sister Sansa.”

“Lady Lannister, you mean? Are you so eager to see the Imp perched on your father’s seat? I promise you, that will not happen whilst I live, Lord Snow.”

Jon knew better than to press the point. “Sire, some claim that you mean to grant lands and castles to Rattleshirt and the Magnar of Thenn.”

“Who told you that?”

The talk was all over Castle Black. “If you must know, I had the tale from Gilly.”

“Who is *Gilly*?”

“The wet nurse,” said Lady Melisandre. “Your Grace gave her freedom of the castle.”

“Not for running tales. She’s wanted for her teats, not for her tongue. I’ll have more milk from her, and fewer *messages*.”

“Castle Black needs no useless mouths,” Jon agreed. “I am sending Gilly south on the next ship out of Eastwatch.”

Melisandre touched the ruby at her neck. “Gilly is giving suck to Dalla’s son as well as her own. It seems cruel of you to part our little prince from his milk brother, my lord.”

Careful now, careful. “Mother’s milk is all they share. Gilly’s son is larger and more robust. He kicks the prince and pinches him, and shoves him from the breast. Craster was his father, a cruel man and greedy, and blood tells.”

The king was confused. “I thought the wet nurse was this man Craster’s *daughter*?”

“Wife and daughter both, Your Grace. Craster married all his daughters. Gilly’s boy was the fruit of their union.”

“Her own *father* got this child on her?” Stannis sounded shocked. “We are well rid of her, then. I will not suffer such abominations here. This is not King’s Landing.”

“I can find another wet nurse. If there’s none amongst the wildlings, I will send to the mountain clans. Until such time, goat’s milk should suffice for the boy, if it please Your Grace.”

“Poor fare for a prince ... but better than whore’s milk, aye.” Stannis drummed his fingers on the map. “If we may return to the matter of these forts ...”

“Your Grace,” said Jon, with chilly courtesy, “I have housed your men and fed them, at dire cost to our winter stores. I have clothed them so they would not freeze.”

Stannis was not appeased. “Aye, you’ve shared your salt pork and porridge, and you’ve thrown us some black rags to keep us warm. Rags the wildlings would have taken off your corpses if I had not come north.”

Jon ignored that. “I have given you fodder for your horses, and once the stair is done I will lend you builders to restore the Nightfort. I have even agreed to allow you to settle wildlings on the Gift, which was given to the Night’s Watch in perpetuity.”

“You offer me empty lands and desolations, yet deny me the castles I require to reward my lords and bannermen.”

“The Night’s Watch built those castles ...”

“And the Night’s Watch abandoned them.”

“... to defend the Wall,” Jon finished stubbornly, “not as seats for southron lords. The stones of those forts are mortared with the blood and bones of my brothers, long dead. I cannot give them to you.”

“Cannot or will not?” The cords in the king’s neck stood out sharp as swords. “I offered you a name.”

“I have a name, Your Grace.”

“Snow. Was ever a name more ill-omened?” Stannis touched his sword hilt. “Just who do you imagine that you are?”

“The watcher on the walls. The sword in the darkness.”

“Don’t prate your words at me.” Stannis drew the blade he called Lightbringer. “*Here* is your sword in the darkness.” Light rippled up and down the blade, now red, now yellow, now orange, painting the king’s face in harsh, bright hues. “Even a green boy should be able to see that. Are you blind?”

“No, Sire. I agree these castles must be garrisoned—”

“The boy commander agrees. How fortunate.”

“—by the Night’s Watch.”

“*You do not have the men.*”

“Then give me men, Sire. I will provide officers for each of the abandoned forts, seasoned commanders who know the Wall and the lands beyond, and how best to survive the coming winter. In return for all we’ve given you, grant me the men to fill out the garrisons. Men-at-arms, cross-bowmen, raw boys. I will even take your wounded and infirm.”

Stannis stared at him incredulously, then gave a bark of laughter. “You are bold enough, Snow, I grant you that, but you’re mad if you think my men will take the black.”

“They can wear any color cloak they choose, so long as they obey my officers as they would your own.”

The king was unmoved. “I have knights and lords in my service, scions of noble Houses old in honor. They cannot be expected to serve under

poachers, peasants, and murderers.”

Or bastards, Sire? “Your own Hand is a smuggler.”

“*Was* a smuggler. I shortened his fingers for that. They tell me that you are the nine-hundred-ninety-eighth man to command the Night’s Watch, Lord Snow. What do you think the nine-hundred-ninety-ninth might say about these castles? The sight of your head on a spike might inspire him to be more helpful.” The king laid his bright blade down on the map, along the Wall, its steel shimmering like sunlight on water. “You are only lord commander by my sufferance. You would do well to remember that.”

“I am lord commander because my brothers chose me.” There were mornings when Jon Snow did not quite believe it himself, when he woke up thinking surely this was some mad dream. *It’s like putting on new clothes*, Sam had told him. *The fit feels strange at first, but once you’ve worn them for a while you get to feeling comfortable.*

“Alliser Thorne complains about the manner of your choosing, and I cannot say he does not have a grievance.” The map lay between them like a battleground, drenched by the colors of the glowing sword. “The count was done by a *blind man* with your fat friend by his elbow. And Slynt names you a turncloak.”

And who would know one better than Slynt? “A turncloak would tell you what you wished to hear and betray you later. Your Grace knows that I was fairly chosen. My father always said you were a just man.” *Just but harsh* had been Lord Eddard’s exact words, but Jon did not think it would be wise to share that.

“Lord Eddard was no friend to me, but he was not without some sense. He would have given me these castles.”

Never. “I cannot speak to what my father might have done. I took an oath, Your Grace. The Wall is mine.”

“For now. We will see how well you hold it.” Stannis pointed at him. “Keep your ruins, as they mean so much to you. I promise you, though, if any

remain empty when the year is out, I will take them with your leave or without it. And if even one should fall to the foe, your head will soon follow. Now get out.”

Lady Melisandre rose from her place near the hearth. “With your leave, Sire, I will show Lord Snow back to his chambers.”

“Why? He knows the way.” Stannis waved them both away. “Do what you will. Devan, food. Boiled eggs and lemon water.”

After the warmth of the king’s solar, the turnpike stair felt bone-chillingly cold. “Wind’s rising, m’lady,” the serjeant warned Melisandre as he handed Jon back his weapons. “You might want a warmer cloak.”

“I have my faith to warm me.” The red woman walked beside Jon down the steps. “His Grace is growing fond of you.”

“I can tell. He only threatened to behead me twice.”

Melisandre laughed. “It is his silences you should fear, not his words.” As they stepped out into the yard, the wind filled Jon’s cloak and sent it flapping against her. The red priestess brushed the black wool aside and slipped her arm through his. “It may be that you are not wrong about the wildling king. I shall pray for the Lord of Light to send me guidance. When I gaze into the flames, I can see through stone and earth, and find the truth within men’s souls. I can speak to kings long dead and children not yet born, and watch the years and seasons flicker past, until the end of days.”

“Are your fires never wrong?”

“Never ... though we priests are mortal and sometimes err, mistaking *this must come* for *this may come*.”

Jon could feel her heat, even through his wool and boiled leather. The sight of them arm in arm was drawing curious looks. *They will be whispering in the barracks tonight.* “If you can truly see the morrow in your flames, tell me when and where the next wildling attack will come.” He slipped his arm free.

“R’hllor sends us what visions he will, but I shall seek for this man Tormund in the flames.” Melisandre’s red lips curled into a smile. “I have seen you in my fires, Jon Snow.”

“Is that a threat, my lady? Do you mean to burn me too?”

“You mistake my meaning.” She gave him a searching look. “I fear that I make you uneasy, Lord Snow.”

Jon did not deny it. “The Wall is no place for a woman.”

“You are wrong. I have dreamed of your Wall, Jon Snow. Great was the lore that raised it, and great the spells locked beneath its ice. We walk beneath one of the hinges of the world.” Melisandre gazed up at it, her breath a warm moist cloud in the air. “This is my place as it is yours, and soon enough you may have grave need of me. Do not refuse my friendship, Jon. I have seen you in the storm, hard-pressed, with enemies on every side. You have so many enemies. Shall I tell you their names?”

“I know their names.”

“Do not be so certain.” The ruby at Melisandre’s throat gleamed red. “It is not the foes who curse you to your face that you must fear, but those who smile when you are looking and sharpen their knives when you turn your back. You would do well to keep your wolf close beside you. Ice, I see, and daggers in the dark. Blood frozen red and hard, and naked steel. It was very cold.”

“It is always cold on the Wall.”

“You think so?”

“I *know* so, my lady.”

“Then you know nothing, Jon Snow,” she whispered.