

# JON

They brought forth the King-Beyond-the-Wall with his hands bound by hempen rope and a noose around his neck.

The other end of the rope was looped about the saddle horn of Ser Godry Farring's courser. The Giantslayer and his mount were armored in silvered steel inlaid with niello. Mance Rayder wore only a thin tunic that left his limbs naked to the cold. *They could have let him keep his cloak*, Jon Snow thought, *the one the wildling woman patched with strips of crimson silk.*

Small wonder that the Wall was weeping.

"Mance knows the haunted forest better than any ranger," Jon had told King Stannis, in his final effort to convince His Grace that the King-Beyond-the-Wall would be of more use to them alive than dead. "He knows Tormund Giantsbane. He has fought the Others. And he had the Horn of Joramun and did not blow it. He did not bring down the Wall when he could have."

His words fell on deaf ears. Stannis had remained unmoved. The law was plain; a deserter's life was forfeit.

Beneath the weeping Wall, Lady Melisandre raised her pale white hands. "*We all must choose*," she proclaimed. "Man or woman, young or old, lord or peasant, our choices are the same." Her voice made Jon Snow think of anise and nutmeg and cloves. She stood at the king's side on a wooden scaffold raised above the pit. "We choose light or we choose darkness. We choose good or we choose evil. We choose the true god or the false."

Mance Rayder's thick grey-brown hair blew about his face as he walked. He pushed it from his eyes with bound hands, smiling. But when he saw the cage, his courage failed him. The queen's men had made it from the trees of the haunted forest, from saplings and supple branches, pine boughs sticky with sap, and the bone-white fingers of the weirwoods. They'd bent them and twisted them around and through each other to weave a wooden lattice, then hung it high above a deep pit filled with logs, leaves, and kindling.

The wildling king recoiled from the sight. “No,” he cried, “*mercy*. This is not right, I’m not the king, they—”

Ser Godry gave a pull on the rope. The King-Beyond-the-Wall had no choice but to stumble after him, the rope choking off his words. When he lost his feet, Godry dragged him the rest of the way. Mance was bloody when the queen’s men half-shoved, half-carried him to the cage. A dozen men-at-arms heaved together to hoist him into the air.

Lady Melisandre watched him rise. “*FREE FOLK!* Here stands your king of lies. And here is the horn he promised would bring down the Wall.” Two queen’s men brought forth the Horn of Joramun, black and banded with old gold, eight feet long from end to end. Runes were carved into the golden bands, the writing of the First Men. Joramun had died thousands of years ago, but Mance had found his grave beneath a glacier, high up in the Frostfangs. *And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter, and woke giants from the earth.* Ygritte had told Jon that Mance never found the horn. *She lied, or else Mance kept it secret even from his own.*

A thousand captives watched through the wooden bars of their stockade as the horn was lifted high. All were ragged and half-starved. *Wild-lings*, the Seven Kingdoms called them; they named themselves *the free folk*. They looked neither wild nor free—only hungry, frightened, numb.

“The Horn of Joramun?” Melisandre said. “No. Call it the Horn of Darkness. If the Wall falls, night falls as well, the long night that never ends. It must not happen, *will* not happen! The Lord of Light has seen his children in their peril and sent a champion to them, Azor Ahai reborn.” She swept a hand toward Stannis, and the great ruby at her throat pulsed with light.

*He is stone and she is flame.* The king’s eyes were blue bruises, sunk deep in a hollow face. He wore grey plate, a fur-trimmed cloak of cloth-of-gold flowing from his broad shoulders. His breastplate had a flaming heart inlaid above his own. Girding his brows was a red-gold crown with points like twisting flames. Val stood beside him, tall and fair. They had crowned her with a simple circlet of dark bronze, yet she looked more regal in bronze than Stannis did in gold. Her eyes were grey and fearless, unflinching.

Beneath an ermine cloak, she wore white and gold. Her honey-blond hair had been done up in a thick braid that hung over her right shoulder to her waist. The chill in the air had put color in her cheeks.

Lady Melisandre wore no crown, but every man there knew that she was Stannis Baratheon's real queen, not the homely woman he had left to shiver at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. Talk was, the king did not mean to send for Queen Selyse and their daughter until the Nightfort was ready for habitation. Jon felt sorry for them. The Wall offered few of the comforts that southron ladies and little highborn girls were used to, and the Night-fort offered none. That was a grim place, even at the best of times.

“*FREE FOLK!*” cried Melisandre. “Behold the fate of those who choose the darkness!”

The Horn of Joramun burst into flame.

It went up with a *whoosh* as swirling tongues of green and yellow fire leapt up crackling all along its length. Jon's garron shied nervously, and up and down the ranks others fought to still their mounts as well. A moan came from the stockade as the free folk saw their hope afire. A few began to shout and curse, but most lapsed into silence. For half a heartbeat the runes graven on the gold bands seemed to shimmer in the air. The queen's men gave a heave and sent the horn tumbling down into the fire pit.

Inside his cage, Mance Rayder clawed at the noose about his neck with bound hands and screamed incoherently of treachery and witchery, denying his kingship, denying his people, denying his name, denying all that he had ever been. He shrieked for mercy and cursed the red woman and began to laugh hysterically.

Jon watched unblinking. He dare not appear squeamish before his brothers. He had ordered out two hundred men, more than half the garrison of Castle Black. Mounted in solemn sable ranks with tall spears in hand, they had drawn up their hoods to shadow their faces ... and hide the fact that so many were greybeards and green boys. The free folk feared the Watch. Jon wanted them to take that fear with them to their new homes south of the Wall.

The horn crashed amongst the logs and leaves and kindling. Within three heartbeats the whole pit was aflame. Clutching the bars of his cage with bound hands, Mance sobbed and begged. When the fire reached him he did a little dance. His screams became one long, wordless shriek of fear and pain. Within his cage, he fluttered like a burning leaf, a moth caught in a candle flame.

Jon found himself remembering a song.

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*Brothers, oh brothers, my days here are done, the Dornishman's taken my life,*

*But what does it matter, for all men must die, and I've tasted the Dornishman's wife!*

Val stood on the platform as still as if she had been carved of salt. *She will not weep nor look away.* Jon wondered what Ygritte would have done in her place. *The women are the strong ones.* He found himself thinking about Sam and Maester Aemon, about Gilly and the babe. *She will curse me with her dying breath, but I saw no other way.* Eastwatch reported savage storms upon the narrow sea. *I meant to keep them safe. Did I feed them to the crabs instead?* Last night he had dreamed of Sam drowning, of Ygritte dying with his arrow in her (it had not been his arrow, but in his dreams it always was), of Gilly weeping tears of blood.

Jon Snow had seen enough. “Now,” he said.

Ulmer of the Kingswood jammed his spear into the ground, unslung his bow, and slipped a black arrow from his quiver. Sweet Donnel Hill threw back his hood to do the same. Garth Greyfeather and Bearded Ben nocked shafts, bent their bows, loosed.

One arrow took Mance Rayder in the chest, one in the gut, one in the throat. The fourth struck one of the cage's wooden bars, and quivered for an instant before catching fire. A woman's sobs echoed off the Wall as the wildling king slid bonelessly to the floor of his cage, wreathed in fire. “And now his

Watch is done,” Jon murmured softly. Mance Rayder had been a man of the Night’s Watch once, before he changed his black cloak for one slashed with bright red silk.

Up on the platform, Stannis was scowling. Jon refused to meet his eyes. The bottom had fallen out of the wooden cage, and its bars were crumbling. Every time the fire licked upward, more branches tumbled free, cherry red and black. “The Lord of Light made the sun and moon and stars to light our way, and gave us fire to keep the night at bay,” Melisandre told the wildlings. “None can withstand his flames.”

*“None can withstand his flames,”* the queen’s men echoed.

The red woman’s robes of deep-dyed scarlet swirled about her, and her coppery hair made a halo round her face. Tall yellow flames danced from her fingertips like claws. *“FREE FOLK!* Your false gods cannot help you. Your false horn did not save you. Your false king brought you only death, despair, defeat ... but here stands the true king. *BEHOLD HIS GLORY!”*

Stannis Baratheon drew Lightbringer.

The sword glowed red and yellow and orange, alive with light. Jon had seen the show before ... but not like *this*, never before like this. Light-bringer was the sun made steel. When Stannis raised the blade above his head, men had to turn their heads or cover their eyes. Horses shied, and one threw his rider. The blaze in the fire pit seemed to shrink before this storm of light, like a small dog cowering before a larger one. The Wall itself turned red and pink and orange, as waves of color danced across the ice. *Is this the power of king’s blood?*

“Westeros has but one king,” said Stannis. His voice rang harsh, with none of Melisandre’s music. “With this sword I defend my subjects and destroy those who menace them. Bend the knee, and I promise you food, land, and justice. Kneel and live. Or go and die. The choice is yours.” He slipped Lightbringer into its scabbard, and the world darkened once again, as if the sun had gone behind a cloud. “Open the gates.”

“*OPEN THE GATES*,” bellowed Ser Clayton Suggs, in a voice as deep as a warhorn. “*OPEN THE GATES*,” echoed Ser Corliss Penny, commanding the guards. “*OPEN THE GATES*,” cried the serjeants. Men scrambled to obey. Sharpened stakes were wrenched from the ground, planks were dropped across deep ditches, and the stockade gates were thrown wide. Jon Snow raised his hand and lowered it, and his black ranks parted right and left, clearing a path to the Wall, where Dolorous Edd Tollett pushed open the iron gate.

“Come,” urged Melisandre. “Come to the light ... or run back to the darkness.” In the pit below her, the fire was crackling. “If you choose life, come to me.”

And they came. Slowly at first, some limping or leaning on their fellows, the captives began to emerge from their rough-hewn pen. *If you would eat, come to me*, Jon thought. *If you would not freeze or starve, submit*. Hesitant, wary of some trap, the first few prisoners edged across the planks and through the ring of the stakes, toward Melisandre and the Wall. More followed, when they saw that no harm had come to those who went before. Then more, until it was a steady stream. Queen’s men in studded jacks and halfhelms handed each passing man, woman, or child a piece of white weirwood: a stick, a splintered branch as pale as broken bone, a spray of blood-red leaves. *A piece of the old gods to feed the new*. Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand.

The heat from the fire pit was palpable even at a distance; for the wildlings, it had to be blistering. He saw men cringing as they neared the flames, heard children cry. A few turned for the forest. He watched a young woman stumble away with a child on either hand. Every few steps she looked back to make certain no one was coming after them, and when she neared the trees she broke into a run. One greybeard took the weir-wood branch they handed him and used it as a weapon, laying about with it until the queen’s men converged on him with spears. The others had to step around his body, until Ser Corliss had it thrown in the fire. More of the free folk chose the woods after that—one in ten, perhaps.

But most came on. Behind them was only cold and death. Ahead was hope. They came on, clutching their scraps of wood until the time came to feed

them to the flames. R'hllor was a jealous deity, ever hungry. So the new god devoured the corpse of the old, and cast gigantic shadows of Stannis and Melisandre upon the Wall, black against the ruddy red reflections on the ice.

Sigorn was the first to kneel before the king. The new Magnar of Thenn was a younger, shorter version of his father—lean, balding, clad in bronze greaves and a leather shirt sewn with bronze scales. Next came Rattleshirt in clattering armor made of bones and boiled leather, his helm a giant's skull. Under the bones lurked a ruined and wretched creature with cracked brown teeth and a yellow tinge to the whites of his eyes. *A small, malicious, treacherous man, as stupid as he is cruel.* Jon did not believe for a moment that he would keep faith. He wondered what Val was feeling as she watched him kneel, forgiven.

Lesser leaders followed. Two clan chiefs of the Hornfoot men, whose feet were black and hard. An old wisewoman revered by the peoples of the Milkwater. A scrawny dark-eyed boy of two-and-ten, the son of Alfyn Crowkiller. Halleck, brother to Harma Dogshead, with her pigs. Each took a knee before the king.

*It is too cold for this mummer's show,* thought Jon. "The free folk despise kneelers," he had warned Stannis. "Let them keep their pride, and they will love you better." His Grace would not listen. He said, "It is swords I need from them, not kisses."

Having knelt, the wildlings shuffled past the ranks of the black brothers to the gate. Jon had detailed Horse and Satin and half a dozen others to lead them through the Wall with torches. On the far side, bowls of hot onion soup awaited them, and chunks of black bread and sausage. Clothes as well: cloaks, breeches, boots, tunics, good leather gloves. They would sleep on piles of clean straw, with fires blazing to keep the chill of night at bay. This king was nothing if not methodical. Soon or late, however, Tormund Giantsbane would assault the Wall again, and when that hour came Jon wondered whose side Stannis's new-made subjects would choose. *You can give them land and mercy, but the free folk choose their own kings, and it was Mance they chose, not you.*

Bowen Marsh edged his mount up next to Jon's. "This is a day I never thought to see." The Lord Steward had thinned notably since suffering a head wound at the Bridge of Skulls. Part of one ear was gone. *He no longer looks much like a pomegranate*, Jon thought. Marsh said, "We bled to stop the wildlings at the Gorge. Good men were slain there, friends and brothers. For what?"

"The realm will curse us all for this," declared Ser Alliser Thorne in a venomous tone. "Every honest man in Westeros will turn his head and spit at the mention of the Night's Watch."

*What would you know of honest men?* "Quiet in the ranks." Ser Alliser had grown more circumspect since Lord Janos had lost his head, but the malice was still there. Jon had toyed with the idea of giving him the command Slynt had refused, but he wanted the man close. *He was always the more dangerous of the two*. Instead he had dispatched a grizzled steward from the Shadow Tower to take command at Greyguard.

He hoped the two new garrisons would make a difference. *The Watch can make the free folk bleed, but in the end we cannot hope to stop them*. Giving Mance Rayder to the fire did not change the truth of that. *We are still too few and they are still too many, and without rangers, we're good as blind. I have to send men out. But if I do, will they come back again?*

The tunnel through the Wall was narrow and twisting, and many of the wildlings were old or ill or wounded, so the going was painfully slow. By the time the last of them had bent the knee, night had fallen. The pit fire was burning low, and the king's shadow on the Wall had shrunk to a quarter of its former height. Jon Snow could see his breath in the air. *Cold*, he thought, *and getting colder. This mummer's show has gone on long enough*.

Two score captives lingered by the stockade. Four giants were among them, massive hairy creatures with sloped shoulders, legs as large as tree trunks, and huge splayed feet. Big as they were, they might still have passed through the Wall, but one would not leave his mammoth, and the others would not leave him. The rest of those who remained were all of human stature. Some were dead and some were dying; more were their kin or close companions, unwilling to abandon them even for a bowl of onion soup.



Some shivering, some too numb to shiver, they listened as the king's voice rumbled off the Wall. "You are free to go," Stannis told them. "Tell your people what you witnessed. Tell them that you saw the true king, and that they are welcome in his realm, so long as they keep his peace. Else-wise, they had best flee or hide. I will brook no further attacks upon my Wall."

*"One realm, one god, one king!"* cried Lady Melisandre.

The queen's men took up the cry, beating the butts of their spears against their shields. *"One realm, one god, one king! STANNIS! STANNIS! ONE REALM, ONE GOD, ONE KING!"*

Val did not join the chant, he saw. Nor did the brothers of the Night's Watch. During the tumult the few remaining wildlings melted into the trees. The giants were the last to go, two riding on the back of a mammoth, the other two afoot. Only the dead were left behind. Jon watched Stannis descend from the platform, with Melisandre by his side. *His red shadow. She never leaves his side for long.* The king's honor guard fell in around them—Ser Godry, Ser Clayton, and a dozen other knights, queen's men all. Moonlight shimmered on their armor and the wind whipped at their cloaks. "Lord Steward," Jon told Marsh, "break up that stockade for firewood and throw the corpses in the flames."

"As my lord commands." Marsh barked out orders, and a swarm of his stewards broke from ranks to attack the wooden walls. The Lord Steward watched them, frowning. "These wildlings ... do you think they will keep faith, my lord?"

"Some will. Not all. We have our cowards and our knaves, our weak-lings and our fools, as do they."

"Our vows ... we are sworn to protect the realm ..."

"Once the free folk are settled in the Gift, they will become part of the realm," Jon pointed out. "These are desperate days, and like to grow more desperate. We have seen the face of our real foe, a dead white face with bright blue eyes. The free folk have seen that face as well. Stannis is not wrong in this. We must make common cause with the wildlings."

“Common cause against a common foe, I could agree with that,” said Bowen Marsh, “but that does not mean we should allow tens of thousands of half-starved savages through the Wall. Let them return to their villages and fight the Others there, whilst we seal the gates. It will not be difficult, Othell tells me. We need only fill the tunnels with chunks of stone and pour water through the murder holes. The Wall does the rest. The cold, the weight ... in a moon’s turn, it will be as if no gate had ever been. Any foe would need to hack his way through.”

“Or climb.”

“Unlikely,” said Bowen Marsh. “These are not raiders, out to steal a wife and some plunder. Tormund will have old women with him, children, herds of sheep and goats, even *mammoths*. He needs a *gate*, and only three of those remain. And if he should send climbers up, well, defending against climbers is as simple as spearing fish in a kettle.”

*Fish never climb out of the kettle and shove a spear through your belly.* Jon had climbed the Wall himself.

Marsh went on. “Mance Rayder’s bowmen must have loosed ten thousand arrows at us, judging from the number of spent shafts we’ve gathered up. Fewer than a hundred reached our men atop the Wall, most of those lifted by some errant gust of wind. Red Alyn of the Rosewood was the only man to die up there, and it was his fall that killed him, not the arrow that pricked his leg. Donal Noye died to hold the gate. A gallant act, yes ... but if the gate had been sealed, our brave armorer might still be with us. Whether we face a hundred foes or a hundred thousand, so long as we’re atop the Wall and they’re below, they cannot do us harm.”

*He’s not wrong.* Mance Rayder’s host had broken against the Wall like a wave upon a stony shore, though the defenders were no more than a handful of old men, green boys, and cripples. Yet what Bowen was suggesting went against all of Jon’s instincts. “If we seal the gates, we cannot send out rangers,” he pointed out. “We will be as good as blind.”

“Lord Mormont’s last ranging cost the Watch a quarter of its men, my lord. We need to conserve what strength remains us. Every death diminishes us,

and we are stretched so thin ... Take the high ground and win the battle, my uncle used to say. No ground is higher than the Wall, Lord Commander.”

“Stannis promises land, food, and justice to any wildlings who bend the knee. He will never permit us to seal the gates.”

Marsh hesitated. “Lord Snow, I am not one to bear tales, but there has been talk that you are becoming too ... too friendly with Lord Stannis. Some even suggest that you are ... a ...”

*A rebel and a turncloak, aye, and a bastard and a warg as well.* Janos Slynt might be gone, but his lies lingered. “I know what they say.” Jon had heard the whispers, had seen men turn away when he crossed the yard. “What would they have me do, take up swords against Stannis and the wildlings both? His Grace has thrice the fighting men we do, and is our guest besides. The laws of hospitality protect him. And we owe him and his a debt.”

“Lord Stannis helped us when we needed help,” Marsh said doggedly, “but he is still a rebel, and his cause is doomed. As doomed as we’ll be if the Iron Throne marks us down as traitors. We must be certain that we do not choose the losing side.”

“It is not my intent to choose any side,” said Jon, “but I am not as certain of the outcome of this war as you seem to be, my lord. Not with Lord Tywin dead.” If the tales coming up the kingsroad could be believed, the King’s Hand had been murdered by his dwarf son whilst sitting on a privy. Jon had known Tyrion Lannister, briefly. *He took my hand and named me friend.* It was hard to believe the little man had it in him to murder his own sire, but the fact of Lord Tywin’s demise seemed to be beyond doubt. “The lion in King’s Landing is a cub, and the Iron Throne has been known to cut grown men to ribbons.”

“A boy he may be, my lord, but ... King Robert was well loved, and most men still accept that Tommen is his son. The more they see of Lord Stannis the less they love him, and fewer still are fond of Lady Melisandre with her fires and this grim red god of hers. They complain.”

“They complained about Lord Commander Mormont too. Men love to complain about their wives and lords, he told me once. Those without wives complain twice as much about their lords.” Jon Snow glanced toward the stockade. Two walls were down, a third falling fast. “I will leave you to finish here, Bowen. Make certain every corpse is burned. Thank you for your counsel. I promise you, I will think on all you’ve said.”

Smoke and drifting ash still lingered in the air about the pit as Jon trotted back to the gate. There he dismounted, to walk his garron through the ice to the south side. Dolorous Edd went before him with a torch. Its flames licked the ceiling, so cold tears trickled down upon them with every step.

“It was a relief to see that horn burn, my lord,” Edd said. “Just last night I dreamt I was pissing off the Wall when someone decided to give the horn a toot. Not that I’m complaining. It was better than my old dream, where Harma Dogshead was feeding me to her pigs.”

“Harma’s dead,” Jon said. “But not the pigs. They look at me the way Slayer used to look at ham. Not to say that the wildlings mean us harm. Aye, we hacked their gods apart and made them burn the pieces, but we gave them onion soup. What’s a god compared to a nice bowl of onion soup? I could do with one myself.”

The odors of smoke and burned flesh still clung to Jon’s blacks. He knew he had to eat, but it was company he craved, not food. *A cup of wine with Maester Aemon, some quiet words with Sam, a few laughs with Pyp and Grenn and Toad.* Aemon and Sam were gone, though, and his other friends ... “I will take supper with the men this evening.”

“Boiled beef and beets.” Dolorous Edd always seemed to know what was cooking. “Hobb says he’s out of horseradish, though. What good is boiled beef without horseradish?”

Since the wildlings had burned the old common hall, the men of the Night’s Watch took their meals in the stone cellar below the armory, a cavernous space divided by two rows of square stone pillars, with barrel-vaulted ceilings and great casks of wine and ale along the walls. When Jon entered,

four builders were playing at tiles at the table nearest the steps. Closer to the fire sat a group of rangers and a few king's men, talking quietly.

The younger men were gathered at another table, where Pyp had stabbed a turnip with his knife. "The night is dark and full of turnips," he announced in a solemn voice. "Let us all pray for venison, my children, with some onions and a bit of tasty gravy." His friends laughed—Grenn, Toad, Satin, the whole lot of them.

Jon Snow did not join the laughter. "Making mock of another man's prayer is fool's work, Pyp. And dangerous."

"If the red god's offended, let him strike me down."

All the smiles had died. "It was the priestess we were laughing at," said Satin, a lithe and pretty youth who had once been a whore in Oldtown. "We were only having a jape, my lord."

"You have your gods and she has hers. Leave her be."

"She won't let our gods be," argued Toad. "She calls the Seven false gods, m'lord. The old gods too. She made the wildlings burn weirwood branches. You saw."

"Lady Melisandre is not part of my command. You are. I won't have bad blood between the king's men and my own."

Pyp laid a hand on Toad's arm. "Croak no more, brave Toad, for our Great Lord Snow has spoken." Pyp hopped to his feet and gave Jon a mocking bow. "I beg pardon. Henceforth, I shall not even waggle my ears save by your lordship's lordly leave."

*He thinks this is all some game.* Jon wanted to shake some sense into him. "Waggle your ears all you like. It's your tongue waggling that makes the trouble."

"I'll see that he's more careful," Grenn promised, "and I'll clout him if he's not." He hesitated. "My lord, will you sup with us? Owen, shove over and

make room for Jon.”

Jon wanted nothing more. *No*, he had to tell himself, *those days are gone*. The realization twisted in his belly like a knife. They had chosen him to rule. The Wall was his, and their lives were his as well. *A lord may love the men that he commands*, he could hear his lord father saying, *but he cannot be a friend to them. One day he may need to sit in judgment on them, or send them forth to die*. “Another day,” the lord commander lied. “Edd, best see to your own supper. I have work to finish.”

The outside air seemed even colder than before. Across the castle, he could see candlelight shining from the windows of the King’s Tower. Val stood on the tower roof, gazing up at the Wall. Stannis kept her closely penned in rooms above his own, but he did allow her to walk the battlements for exercise. *She looks lonely*, Jon thought. *Lonely, and lovely*. Ygritte had been pretty in her own way, with her red hair kissed by fire, but it was her smile that made her face come alive. Val did not need to smile; she would have turned men’s heads in any court in the wide world.

All the same, the wildling princess was not beloved of her gaolers. She scorned them all as “kneelers,” and had thrice attempted to escape. When one man-at-arms grew careless in her presence she had snatched his dagger from its sheath and stabbed him in the neck. Another inch to the left and he might have died.

*Lonely and lovely and lethal*, Jon Snow reflected, *and I might have had her. Her, and Winterfell, and my lord father’s name*. Instead he had chosen a black cloak and a wall of ice. Instead he had chosen honor. *A bastard’s sort of honor*.

The Wall loomed on his right as he crossed the yard. Its high ice glimmered palely, but down below all was shadow. At the gate a dim orange glow shone through the bars where the guards had taken refuge from the wind. Jon could hear the creak of chains as the winch cage swung and scraped against the ice. Up top, the sentries would be huddling in the warming shed around a brazier, shouting to be heard above the wind. Or else they would have given up the effort, and each man would be sunk in his own pool of silence. *I should be walking the ice. The Wall is mine*.

He was walking beneath the shell of the Lord Commander's Tower, past the spot where Ygritte had died in his arms, when Ghost appeared beside him, his warm breath steaming in the cold. In the moonlight, his red eyes glowed like pools of fire. The taste of hot blood filled Jon's mouth, and he knew that Ghost had killed that night. *No*, he thought. *I am a man, not a wolf*. He rubbed his mouth with the back of a gloved hand and spat.

Clydas still occupied the rooms beneath the rookery. At Jon's knock, he came shuffling, a taper in his hand, to open the door a crack. "Do I intrude?" asked Jon.

"Not at all." Clydas opened the door wider. "I was mulling wine. Will my lord take a cup?"

"With pleasure." His hands were stiff from cold. He pulled off his gloves and flexed his fingers.

Clydas returned to the hearth to stir the wine. *He's sixty if he's a day. An old man. He only seemed young compared with Aemon*. Short and round, he had the dim pink eyes of some nocturnal creature. A few white hairs clung to his scalp. When Clydas poured, Jon held the cup with both hands, sniffed the spices, swallowed. The warmth spread through his chest. He drank again, long and deep, to wash the taste of blood from his mouth.

"The queen's men are saying that the King-Beyond-the-Wall died craven. That he cried for mercy and denied he was a king."

"He did. Lightbringer was brighter than I'd ever seen it. As bright as the sun." Jon raised his cup. "To Stannis Baratheon and his magic sword." The wine was bitter in his mouth.

"His Grace is not an easy man. Few are, who wear a crown. Many good men have been bad kings, Maester Aemon used to say, and some bad men have been good kings."

"He would know." Aemon Targaryen had seen nine kings upon the Iron Throne. He had been a king's son, a king's brother, a king's uncle. "I looked at that book Maester Aemon left me. The *Jade Compendium*. The pages

that told of Azor Ahai. Lightbringer was his sword. Tempered with his wife's blood if Votar can be believed. Thereafter Lightbringer was never cold to the touch, but warm as Nissa Nissa had been warm. In battle the blade burned fiery hot. Once Azor Ahai fought a monster. When he thrust the sword through the belly of the beast, its blood began to boil. Smoke and steam poured from its mouth, its eyes melted and dribbled down its cheeks, and its body burst into flame."

Clydas blinked. "A sword that makes its own heat ..."

"... would be a fine thing on the Wall." Jon put aside his wine cup and drew on his black moleskin gloves. "A pity that the sword that Stannis wields is cold. I'll be curious to see how *his* Lightbringer behaves in battle. Thank you for the wine. Ghost, with me." Jon Snow raised the hood of his cloak and pulled at the door. The white wolf followed him back into the night.

The armory was dark and silent. Jon nodded to the guards before making his way past the silent racks of spears to his rooms. He hung his sword belt from a peg beside the door and his cloak from another. When he peeled off his gloves, his hands were stiff and cold. It took him a long while to get the candles lit. Ghost curled up on his rug and went to sleep, but Jon could not rest yet. The scarred pinewood table was covered with maps of the Wall and the lands beyond, a roster of rangers, and a letter from the Shadow Tower written in Ser Denys Mallister's flowing hand.

He read the letter from the Shadow Tower again, sharpened a quill, and unstoppered a pot of thick black ink. He wrote two letters, the first to Ser Denys, the second to Cotter Pyke. Both of them had been hounding him for more men. Halder and Toad he dispatched west to the Shadow Tower, Grenn and Pyp to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. The ink would not flow properly, and all his words seemed curt and crude and clumsy, yet he persisted.

When he finally put the quill down, the room was dim and chilly, and he could feel its walls closing in. Perched above the window, the Old Bear's raven peered down at him with shrewd black eyes. *My last friend*, Jon thought ruefully. *And I had best outlive you, or you'll eat my face as well.* Ghost did not count. Ghost was closer than a friend. Ghost was part of him.



Jon rose and climbed the steps to the narrow bed that had once been Donal Noye's. *This is my lot*, he realized as he undressed, *from now until the end of my days*.