

## JON

When Qhorin Halfhand told him to find some brush for a fire, Jon knew their end was near.

*It will be good to feel warm again, if only for a little while,* he told himself while he hacked bare branches from the trunk of a dead tree. Ghost sat on his haunches watching, silent as ever. *Will he howl for me when I'm dead, as Bran's wolf howled when he fell?* Jon wondered. *Will Shaggydog howl, far off in Winterfell, and Grey Wind and Nymeria, wherever they might be?*

The moon was rising behind one mountain and the sun sinking behind another as Jon struck sparks from flint and dagger, until finally a wisp of smoke appeared. Qhorin came and stood over him as the first flame rose up flickering from the shavings of bark and dead dry pine needles. "As shy as a maid on her wedding night," the big ranger said in a soft voice, "and near as fair. Sometimes a man forgets how pretty a fire can be."

He was not a man you'd expect to speak of maids and wedding nights. So far as Jon knew, Qhorin had spent his whole life in the Watch. *Did he ever love a maid or have a wedding?* He could not ask. Instead he fanned the fire. When the blaze was all a crackle, he peeled off his stiff gloves to warm his hands, and sighed, wondering if ever a kiss had felt as good. The warmth spread through his fingers like melting butter.

The Halfhand eased himself to the ground and sat cross-legged by the fire, the flickering light playing across the hard planes of his face. Only the two of them remained of the five rangers who had fled the Skirling Pass, back into the blue-grey wilderness of the Frostfangs.

At first Jon had nursed the hope that Squire Dalbridge would keep the wildlings bottled up in the pass. But when they'd heard the call of a far-off horn every man of them knew the squire had fallen. Later they spied the eagle soaring through the dusk on great blue-grey wings and Stonesnake

unslung his bow, but the bird flew out of range before he could so much as string it. Ebben spat and muttered darkly of wargs and skinchangers.

They glimpsed the eagle twice more the day after, and heard the hunting horn behind them echoing against the mountains. Each time it seemed a little louder, a little closer. When night fell, the Halfhand told Ebben to take the squire's garron as well as his own, and ride east for Mormont with all haste, back the way they had come. The rest of them would draw off the pursuit. "Send Jon," Ebben had urged. "He can ride as fast as me."

"Jon has a different part to play."

"He is half a boy still."

"No," said Qhorin, "he is a man of the Night's Watch."

When the moon rose, Ebben parted from them. Stonesnake went east with him a short way, then doubled back to obscure their tracks, and the three who remained set off toward the southwest.

After that the days and nights blurred one into the other. They slept in their saddles and stopped only long enough to feed and water the garrons, then mounted up again. Over bare rock they rode, through gloomy pine forests and drifts of old snow, over icy ridges and across shallow rivers that had no names. Sometimes Qhorin or Stonesnake would loop back to sweep away their tracks, but it was a futile gesture. They were watched. At every dawn and every dusk they saw the eagle soaring between the peaks, no more than a speck in the vastness of the sky.

They were scaling a low ridge between two snowcapped peaks when a shadowcat came snarling from its lair, not ten yards away. The beast was gaunt and half-starved, but the sight of it sent Stonesnake's mare into a panic; she reared and ran, and before the ranger could get her back under control she had stumbled on the steep slope and broken a leg.

Ghost ate well that day, and Qhorin insisted that the rangers mix some of the garron's blood with their oats, to give them strength. The taste of that foul porridge almost choked Jon, but he forced it down. They each cut a

dozen strips of raw stringy meat from the carcass to chew on as they rode, and left the rest for the shadowcats.

There was no question of riding double. Stonesnake offered to lay in wait for the pursuit and surprise them when they came. Perhaps he could take a few of them with him down to hell. Qhorin refused. "If any man in the Night's Watch can make it through the Frostfangs alone and afoot, it is you, brother. You can go over mountains that a horse must go around. Make for the Fist. Tell Mormont what Jon saw, and how. Tell him that the old powers are waking, that he faces giants and wargs and worse. Tell him that the trees have eyes again."

*He has no chance*, Jon thought when he watched Stonesnake vanish over a snow-covered ridge, a tiny black bug crawling across a rippling expanse of white.

After that, every night seemed colder than the night before, and more lonely. Ghost was not always with them, but he was never far either. Even when they were apart, Jon sensed his nearness. He was glad for that. The Halfhand was not the most companionable of men. Qhorin's long grey braid swung slowly with the motion of his horse. Often they would ride for hours without a word spoken, the only sounds the soft scrape of horseshoes on stone and the keening of the wind, which blew endlessly through the heights. When he slept, he did not dream; not of wolves, nor his brothers, nor anything. *Even dreams cannot live up here*, he told himself.

"Is your sword sharp, Jon Snow?" asked Qhorin Halfhand across the flickering fire.

"My sword is Valyrian steel. The Old Bear gave it to me."

"Do you remember the words of your vow?"

"Yes." They were not words a man was like to forget. Once said, they could never be unsaid. They changed your life forever.

"Say them again with me, Jon Snow."

"If you like." Their voices blended as one beneath the rising moon, while Ghost listened and the mountains themselves bore witness. "Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. I shall

take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch, for this night and all the nights to come."

When they were done, there was no sound but the faint crackle of the flames and a distant sigh of wind. Jon opened and closed his burnt fingers, holding tight to the words in his mind, praying that his father's gods would give him the strength to die bravely when his hour came. It would not be long now. The garrons were near the end of their strength. Qhorin's mount would not last another day, Jon suspected.

The flames were burning low by then, the warmth fading. "The fire will soon go out," Qhorin said, "but if the Wall should ever fall, all the fires will go out."

There was nothing Jon could say to that. He nodded.

"We may escape them yet," the ranger said. "Or not."

"I'm not afraid to die." It was only half a lie.

"It may not be so easy as that, Jon."

He did not understand. "What do you mean?"

"If we are taken, you must yield."

"Yield?" He blinked in disbelief. The wildlings did not make captives of the men they called the crows. They killed them, except for... "They only spare oathbreakers. Those who join them, like Mance Rayder."

"And you."

"No." He shook his head. "Never. I won't."

"You will. I command it of you."

"*Command* it? But..."

"Our honor means no more than our lives, so long as the realm is safe. Are you a man of the Night's Watch?"

"Yes, but—"

“There is no *but*, Jon Snow. You are, or you are not.”

Jon sat up straight. “I am.”

“Then hear me. If we are taken, you will go over to them, as the wildling girl you captured once urged you. They may demand that you cut your cloak to ribbons, that you swear them an oath on your father’s grave, that you curse your brothers and your Lord Commander. You must not balk, whatever is asked of you. Do as they bid you... but in your heart, remember who and what you are. Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them, for as long as it takes. And *watch*.”

“For what?” Jon asked.

“Would that I knew,” said Qhorin. “Your wolf saw their diggings in the valley of the Milkwater. What did they seek, in such a bleak and distant place? Did they find it? That is what you must learn, before you return to Lord Mormont and your brothers. That is the duty I lay on you, Jon Snow.”

“I’ll do as you say,” Jon said reluctantly, “but... you will tell them, won’t you? The Old Bear, at least? You’ll tell him that I never broke my oath.”

Qhorin Halfhand gazed at him across the fire, his eyes lost in pools of shadow. “When I see him next. I swear it.” He gestured at the fire. “More wood. I want it bright and hot.”

Jon went to cut more branches, snapping each one in two before tossing it into the flames. The tree had been dead a long time, but it seemed to live again in the fire, as fiery dancers woke within each stick of wood to whirl and spin in their glowing gowns of yellow, red, and orange.

“Enough,” Qhorin said abruptly. “Now we ride.”

“Ride?” It was dark beyond the fire, and the night was cold. “Ride where?”

“Back.” Qhorin mounted his weary garron one more time. “The fire will draw them past, I hope. Come, brother.”

Jon pulled on his gloves again and raised his hood. Even the horses seemed reluctant to leave the fire. The sun was long gone, and only the cold silver shine of the half-moon remained to light their way over the

treacherous ground that lay behind them. He did not know what Qhorin had in mind, but perhaps it was a chance. He hoped so. *I do not want to play the oathbreaker, even for good reason.*

They went cautiously, moving as silent as man and horse could move, retracing their steps until they reached the mouth of a narrow defile where an icy little stream emerged from between two mountains. Jon remembered the place. They had watered the horses here before the sun went down.

“The water’s icing up,” Qhorin observed as he turned aside, “else we’d ride in the streambed. But if we break the ice, they are like to see. Keep close to the cliffs. There’s a crook a half mile on that will hide us.” He rode into the defile. Jon gave one last wistful look to their distant fire, and followed.

The farther in they went, the closer the cliffs pressed to either side. They followed the moonlit ribbon of stream back toward its source. Icicles bearded its stony banks, but Jon could still hear the sound of rushing water beneath the thin hard crust.

A great jumble of fallen rock blocked their way partway up, where a section of the cliff face had fallen, but the surefooted little garrons were able to pick their way through. Beyond, the walls pinched in sharply, and the stream led them to the foot of a tall twisting waterfall. The air was full of mist, like the breath of some vast cold beast. The tumbling waters shone silver in the moonlight. Jon looked about in dismay. *There is no way out.* He and Qhorin might be able to climb the cliffs, but not with the horses. He did not think they would last long afoot.

“Quickly now,” the Halfhand commanded. The big man on the small horse rode over the ice-slick stones, right into the curtain of water, and vanished. When he did not reappear, Jon put his heels into his horse and went after. His garron did his best to shy away. The falling water slapped at them with frozen fists, and the shock of the cold seemed to stop Jon’s breath.

Then he was through; drenched and shivering, but through.

The cleft in the rock was barely large enough for man and horse to pass, but beyond, the walls opened up and the floor turned to soft sand. Jon

could feel the spray freezing in his beard. Ghost burst through the waterfall in an angry rush, shook droplets from his fur, sniffed at the darkness suspiciously, then lifted a leg against one rocky wall. Qhorin had already dismounted. Jon did the same. "You knew this place was here."

"When I was no older than you, I heard a brother tell how he followed a shadowcat through these falls." He unsaddled his horse, removed her bit and bridle, and ran his fingers through her shaggy mane. "There is a way through the heart of the mountain. Come dawn, if they have not found us, we will press on. The first watch is mine, brother." Qhorin seated himself on the sand, his back to a wall, no more than a vague black shadow in the gloom of the cave. Over the rush of falling waters, Jon heard a soft sound of steel on leather that could only mean that the Halfhand had drawn his sword.

He took off his wet cloak, but it was too cold and damp here to strip down any further. Ghost stretched out beside him and licked his glove before curling up to sleep. Jon was grateful for his warmth. He wondered if the fire was still burning outside, or if it had gone out by now. *If the Wall should ever fall, all the fires will go out.* The moon shone through the curtain of falling water to lay a shimmering pale stripe across the sand, but after a time that too faded and went dark.

Sleep came at last, and with it nightmares. He dreamed of burning castles and dead men rising unquiet from their graves. It was still dark when Qhorin woke him. While the Halfhand slept, Jon sat with his back to the cave wall, listening to the water and waiting for the dawn.

At break of day, they each chewed a half-frozen strip of horsemeat, then saddled their garrons once again, and fastened their black cloaks around their shoulders. During his watch the Halfhand had made a half-dozen torches, soaking bundles of dry moss with the oil he carried in his saddlebag. He lit the first one now and led the way down into the dark, holding the pale flame up before him. Jon followed with the horses. The stony path twisted and turned, first down, then up, then down more steeply. In spots it grew so narrow it was hard to convince the garrons they could squeeze through. *By the time we come out we will have lost them,* he told

himself as they went. *Not even an eagle can see through solid stone. We will have lost them, and we will ride hard for the Fist, and tell the Old Bear all we know.*

But when they emerged back into the light long hours later, the eagle was waiting for them, perched on a dead tree a hundred feet up the slope. Ghost went bounding up the rocks after it, but the bird flapped its wings and took to the air.

Qhorin's mouth tightened as he followed its flight with his eyes.

"Here is as good a place as any to make a stand," he declared. "The mouth of the cave shelters us from above, and they cannot get behind us without passing through the mountain. Is your sword sharp, Jon Snow?"

"Yes," he said.

"We'll feed the horses. They've served us bravely, poor beasts."

Jon gave his garron the last of the oats and stroked his shaggy mane while Ghost prowled restlessly amongst the rocks. He pulled his gloves on tighter and flexed his burnt fingers. *I am the shield that guards the realms of men.*

A hunting horn echoed through the mountains, and a moment later Jon heard the baying of hounds. "They will be with us soon," announced Qhorin. "Keep your wolf in hand."

"Ghost, to me," Jon called. The direwolf returned reluctantly to his side, tail held stiffly behind him.

The wildlings came boiling over a ridge not half a mile away. Their hounds ran before them, snarling grey-brown beasts with more than a little wolf in their blood. Ghost bared his teeth, his fur bristling. "Easy," Jon murmured. "Stay." Overhead he heard a rustle of wings. The eagle landed on an outcrop of rock and screamed in triumph.

The hunters approached warily, perhaps fearing arrows. Jon counted fourteen, with eight dogs. Their large round shields were made of skins stretched over woven wicker and painted with skulls. About half of them hid their faces behind crude helms of wood and boiled leather. On either wing, archers notched shafts to the strings of small wood-and-horn bows,



but did not loose. The rest seemed to be armed with spears and mauls. One had a chipped stone axe. They wore only what bits of armor they had looted from dead rangers or stolen during raids. Wildlings did not mine or smelt, and there were few smiths and fewer forges north of the Wall.

Qhorin drew his longsword. The tale of how he had taught himself to fight with his left hand after losing half of his right was part of his legend; it was said that he handled a blade better now than he ever had before. Jon stood shoulder to shoulder with the big ranger and pulled Longclaw from its sheath. Despite the chill in the air, sweat stung his eyes.

Ten yards below the cave mouth the hunters halted. Their leader came on alone, riding a beast that seemed more goat than horse, from the surefooted way it climbed the uneven slope. As man and mount grew nearer Jon could hear them clattering; both were armored in bones. Cow bones, sheep bones, the bones of goats and aurochs and elk, the great bones of the hairy mammoths... and human bones as well.

“Rattleshirt,” Qhorin called down, icy-polite.

“To crows I be the Lord o’ Bones.” The rider’s helm was made from the broken skull of a giant, and all up and down his arms bearclaws had been sewn to his boiled leather.

Qhorin snorted. “I see no lord. Only a dog dressed in chickenbones, who rattles when he rides.”

The wildling hissed in anger, and his mount reared. He *did* rattle, Jon could hear it; the bones were strung together loosely, so they clacked and clattered when he moved. “It’s *your* bones I’ll be rattling soon, Halfhand. I’ll boil the flesh off you and make a byrnie from your ribs. I’ll carve your teeth to cast me runes, and eat me oaten porridge from your skull.”

“If you want my bones, come get them.”

That, Rattleshirt seemed reluctant to do. His numbers meant little in the close confines of the rocks where the black brothers had taken their stand; to winkle them out of the cave the wildlings would need to come up two at a time. But another of his company edged a horse up beside him, one of the

fighting women called *spearwives*. “We are four-and-ten to two, crows, and eight dogs to your wolf,” she called. “Fight or run, you are ours.”

“Show them,” commanded Rattleshirt.

The woman reached into a bloodstained sack and drew out a trophy. Ebben had been bald as an egg, so she dangled the head by an ear. “He died brave,” she said.

“But he died,” said Rattleshirt, “same like you.” He freed his battleaxe, brandishing it above his head. Good steel it was, with a wicked gleam to both blades; Ebben was never a man to neglect his weapons. The other wildlings crowded forward beside him, yelling taunts. A few chose Jon for their mockery. “Is that your wolf, boy?” a skinny youth called, unlimbering a stone flail. “He’ll be my cloak before the sun is down.” On the other side of the line, another spearwife opened her ragged furs to show Jon a heavy white breast. “Does the baby want his mamma? Come, have a suck o’ this, boy.” The dogs were barking too.

“They would shame us into folly.” Qhorin gave Jon a long look. “Remember your orders.”

“Belike we need to flush the crows,” Rattleshirt bellowed over the clamor. “Feather them!”

“*No!*” The word burst from Jon’s lips before the bowmen could loose. He took two quick steps forward. “We yield!”

“They warned me bastard blood was craven,” he heard Qhorin Halfhand say coldly behind him. “I see it is so. Run to your new masters, coward.”

Face reddening, Jon descended the slope to where Rattleshirt sat his horse. The wildling stared at him through the eyeholes of his helm, and said, “The free folk have no need of cravens.”

“He is no craven.” One of the archers pulled off her sewn sheepskin helm and shook out a head of shaggy red hair. “This is the Bastard o’ Winterfell, who spared me. Let him live.”

Jon met Ygritte’s eyes, and had no words.

“Let him die,” insisted the Lord of Bones. “The black crow is a tricky bird. I trust him not.”

On a rock above them, the eagle flapped its wings and split the air with a scream of fury.

“The bird hates you, Jon Snow,” said Ygritte. “And well he might. He was a man, before you killed him.”

“I did not know,” said Jon truthfully, trying to remember the face of the man he had slain in the pass. “You told me Mance would take me.”

“And he will,” Ygritte said.

“Mance is not here,” said Rattleshirt. “Ragwyle, gut him.”

The big spearwife narrowed her eyes and said, “If the crow would join the free folk, let him show us his prowess and prove the truth of him.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask.” The words came hard, but Jon said them.

Rattleshirt’s bone armor clattered loudly as he laughed. “Then kill the Halfhand, bastard.”

“As if he could,” said Qhorin. “*Turn, Snow, and die.*”

And then Qhorin’s sword was coming at him and somehow Longclaw leapt upward to block. The force of impact almost knocked the bastard blade from Jon’s hand, and sent him staggering backward. *You must not balk, whatever is asked of you.* He shifted to a two-hand grip, quick enough to deliver a stroke of his own, but the big ranger brushed it aside with contemptuous ease. Back and forth they went, black cloaks swirling, the youth’s quickness against the savage strength of Qhorin’s left-hand cuts. The Halfhand’s longsword seemed to be everywhere at once, raining down from one side and then the other, driving him where he would, keeping him off balance. Already he could feel his arms growing numb.

Even when Ghost’s teeth closed savagely around the ranger’s calf, somehow Qhorin kept his feet. But in that instant, as he twisted, the opening was there. Jon planted and pivoted. The ranger was leaning away, and for an instant it seemed that Jon’s slash had not touched him. Then a string of red tears appeared across the big man’s throat, bright as a ruby necklace, and the blood gushed out of him, and Qhorin Halfhand fell.

Ghost's muzzle was dripping red, but only the point of the bastard blade was stained, the last half inch. Jon pulled the direwolf away and knelt with one arm around him. The light was already fading in Qhorin's eyes. "...sharp," he said, lifting his maimed fingers. Then his hand fell, and he was gone.

*He knew*, he thought numbly. *He knew what they would ask of me*. He thought of Samwell Tarly then, of Grenn and Dolorous Edd, of Pyp and Toad back at Castle Black. Had he lost them all, as he had lost Bran and Rickon and Robb? Who was he now? What was he?

"Get him up." Rough hands dragged him to his feet. Jon did not resist. "Do you have a name?"

Ygritte answered for him. "His name is Jon Snow. He is Eddard Stark's blood, of Winterfell."

Ragwyle laughed. "Who would have thought it? Qhorin Halfhand slain by some lordling's byblow."

"Gut him." That was Rattleshirt, still ahorse. The eagle flew to him and perched atop his bony helm, screeching.

"He yielded," Ygritte reminded them.

"Aye, and slew his brother," said a short homely man in a rust-eaten iron halfhelmet.

Rattleshirt rode closer, bones clattering. "The wolf did his work for him. It were foully done. The Halfhand's death was mine."

"We all saw how eager you were to take it," mocked Ragwyle.

"He is a warg," said the Lord of Bones, "and a crow. I like him not."

"A warg he may be," Ygritte said, "but that has never frightened us." Others shouted agreement. Behind the eyeholes of his yellowed skull Rattleshirt's stare was malignant, but he yielded grudgingly. *These are a free folk indeed*, thought Jon.

They burned Qhorin Halfhand where he'd fallen, on a pyre made of pine needles, brush, and broken branches. Some of the wood was still green, and it burned slow and smoky, sending a black plume up into the bright hard blue of the sky. Afterward Rattleshirt claimed some charred

bones, while the others threw dice for the ranger's gear. Ygritte won his cloak.

“Will we return by the Skirling Pass?” Jon asked her. He did not know if he could face those heights again, or if his garron could survive a second crossing.

“No,” she said. “There's nothing behind us.” The look she gave him was sad. “By now Mance is well down the Milkwater, marching on your Wall.”