



JON

The ground was littered with pine needles and blown leaves, a carpet of green and brown still damp from the recent rains. It squished beneath their feet. Huge bare oaks, tall sentinels, and hosts of soldier pines stood all around them. On a hill above them was another roundtower, ancient and empty, thick green moss crawling up its side almost to the summit. “Who built that, all of stone like that?” Ygritte asked him. “Some king?”

“No. Just the men who used to live here.”

“What happened to them?”

“They died or went away.” Brandon’s Gift had been farmed for thousands of years, but as the Watch dwindled there were fewer hands to plow the fields, tend the bees, and plant the orchards, so the wild had reclaimed many a field and hall. In the New Gift there had been villages and holdfasts whose taxes, rendered in goods and labor, helped feed and clothe the black brothers. But those were largely gone as well.

“They were fools to leave such a castle,” said Ygritte.

“It’s only a towerhouse. Some little lordling lived there once, with his family and a few sworn men. When raiders came he would light a beacon from the roof. Winterfell has towers three times the size of that.”

She looked as if she thought he was making that up. “How could men build so high, with no giants to lift the stones?”

In legend, Brandon the Builder *had* used giants to help raise Winterfell, but Jon did not want to confuse the issue. “Men can build a lot higher than this. In Oldtown there’s a tower taller than the Wall.” He could tell she did not believe him. *If I could show her Winterfell . . . give her a flower from the glass gardens, feast her in the Great Hall, and show her the stone kings on their thrones. We could bathe in the hot pools, and love beneath the heart tree while the old gods watched over us.*

The dream was sweet . . . but Winterfell would never be his to show. It belonged to his brother, the King in the North. He was a Snow, not a Stark. *Bastard, oathbreaker, and turncloak . . .*

“Might be after we could come back here, and live in that tower,” she said. “Would you want that, Jon Snow? After?”

After. The word was a spear thrust. *After the war. After the conquest. After the wildlings break the Wall . . .*

His lord father had once talked about raising new lords and settling them in the abandoned holdfasts as a shield against wildlings. The plan would have required the Watch to yield back a large part of the Gift, but his uncle Benjen believed the Lord Commander could be won around, so long as the new lordlings paid taxes to Castle Black rather than Winterfell. “It is a dream for spring, though,” Lord Eddard had said. “Even the promise of land will not lure men north with a winter coming on.”

If winter had come and gone more quickly and spring had followed in its turn, I might have been chosen to hold one of these towers in my father’s name. Lord Eddard was dead, however, his brother Benjen lost; the shield they dreamt together would never be forged. “This land belongs to the Watch,” Jon said.

Her nostrils flared. “No one lives here.”

“Your raiders drove them off.”

“They were cowards, then. If they wanted the land they should have stayed and fought.”

“Maybe they were tired of fighting. Tired of barring their doors every night and wondering if Rattleshirt or someone like him would break them down to carry off their wives. Tired of having their harvests stolen, and any

valuables they might have. It's easier to move beyond the reach of raiders." *But if the Wall should fail, all the north will lie within the reach of raiders.*

"You know nothing, Jon Snow. Daughters are taken, not wives. *You're* the ones who steal. You took the whole world, and built the Wall t' keep the free folk out."

"Did we?" Sometimes Jon forgot how wild she was, and then she would remind him. "How did that happen?"

"The gods made the earth for all men t' share. Only when the kings come with their crowns and steel swords, they claimed it was all theirs. *My trees, they said, you can't eat them apples. My stream, you can't fish here. My wood, you're not t' hunt. My earth, my water, my castle, my daughter, keep your hands away or I'll chop 'em off, but maybe if you kneel t' me I'll let you have a sniff.* You call us thieves, but at least a thief has t' be brave and clever and quick. A kneeler only has t' kneel."

"Harma and the Bag of Bones don't come raiding for fish and apples. They steal swords and axes. Spices, silks, and furs. They grab every coin and ring and jeweled cup they can find, casks of wine in summer and casks of beef in winter, and they take women in any season and carry them off beyond the Wall."

"And what if they do? I'd sooner be stolen by a strong man than be given t' some weakling by my father."

"You say that, but how can you know? What if you were stolen by someone you hated?"

"He'd have t' be quick and cunning and brave t' steal *me*. So his sons would be strong and smart as well. Why would I hate such a man as that?"

"Maybe he never washes, so he smells as rank as a bear."

"Then I'd push him in a stream or throw a bucket o' water on him. Anyhow, men shouldn't smell sweet like flowers."

"What's wrong with flowers?"

"Nothing, for a bee. For bed I want one o' these." Ygritte made to grab the front of his breeches.

Jon caught her wrist. "What if the man who stole you drank too much?" he insisted. "What if he was brutal or cruel?" He tightened his grip to make

a point. "What if he was stronger than you, and liked to beat you bloody?"

"I'd cut his throat while he slept. You know nothing, Jon Snow." Ygritte twisted like an eel and wrenched away from him.

I know one thing. I know that you are wildling to the bone. It was easy to forget that sometimes, when they were laughing together, or kissing. But then one of them would say something, or do something, and he would suddenly be reminded of the wall between their worlds.

"A man can own a woman or a man can own a knife," Ygritte told him, "but no man can own both. Every little girl learns that from her mother." She raised her chin defiantly and gave her thick red hair a shake. "And men can't own the land no more'n they can own the sea or the sky. You kneelers think you do, but Mance is going t' show you different."

It was a fine brave boast, but it rang hollow. Jon glanced back to make certain the Magnar was not in earshot. Errok, Big Boil, and Hempen Dan were walking a few yards behind them, but paying no attention. Big Boil was complaining of his arse. "Ygritte," he said in a low voice, "Mance cannot win this war."

"He can!" she insisted. "You know nothing, Jon Snow. You have never seen the free folk fight!"

Wildlings fought like heroes or demons, depending on who you talked to, but it came down to the same thing in the end. *They fight with reckless courage, every man out for glory.* "I don't doubt that you're all very brave, but when it comes to battle, discipline beats valor every time. In the end Mance will fail as all the Kings-beyond-the-Wall have failed before him. And when he does, you'll die. All of you."

Ygritte had looked so angry he thought she was about to strike him. "All of *us*," she said. "You too. You're no crow now, Jon Snow. I swore you weren't, so you better not be." She pushed him back against the trunk of a tree and kissed him, full on the lips right there in the midst of the ragged column. Jon heard Grigg the Goat urging her on. Someone else laughed. He kissed her back despite all that. When they finally broke apart, Ygritte was flushed. "You're mine," she whispered. "Mine, as I'm yours. And if we die, we die. All men must die, Jon Snow. But first we'll live."

"Yes." His voice was thick. "First we'll live."

She grinned at that, showing Jon the crooked teeth that he had somehow come to love. *Wildling to the bone*, he thought again, with a sick sad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He flexed the fingers of his sword hand, and wondered what Ygritte would do if she knew his heart. Would she betray him if he sat her down and told her that he was still Ned Stark's son and a man of the Night's Watch? He hoped not, but he dare not take that risk. Too many lives depended on his somehow reaching Castle Black before the Magnar . . . assuming he found a chance to escape the wildlings.

They had descended the south face of the Wall at Greyguard, abandoned for two hundred years. A section of the huge stone steps had collapsed a century before, but even so the descent was a good deal easier than the climb. From there Styr marched them deep into the Gift, to avoid the Watch's customary patrols. Grigg the Goat led them past the few inhabited villages that remained in these lands. Aside from a few scattered roundtowers poking the sky like stone fingers, they saw no sign of man. Through cold wet hills and windy plains they marched, unwatched, unseen.

You must not balk, whatever is asked of you, the Halfhand had said. *Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them, for as long as it takes*. He'd ridden many leagues and walked for more, had shared their bread and salt, and Ygritte's blankets as well, but still they did not trust him. Day and night the Thenns watched him, alert for any signs of betrayal. He could not get away, and soon it would be too late.

Fight with them, Qhorin had said, before he surrendered his own life to Longclaw . . . but it had not come to that, till now. *Once I shed a brother's blood I am lost. I cross the Wall for good then, and there is no crossing back*.

After each day's march the Magnar summoned him to ask shrewd sharp questions about Castle Black, its garrison and defenses. Jon lied where he dared and feigned ignorance a few times, but Grigg the Goat and Errok listened as well, and they knew enough to make Jon careful. Too blatant a lie would betray him.

But the truth was terrible. Castle Black had no defenses, but for the Wall itself. It lacked even wooden palisades or earthen dikes. The "castle" was nothing more than a cluster of towers and keeps, two-thirds of them falling

into ruin. As for the garrison, the Old Bear had taken two hundred on his ranging. Had any returned? Jon could not know. Perhaps four hundred remained at the castle, but most of those were builders or stewards, not rangers.

The Thenns were hardened warriors, and more disciplined than the common run of wildling; no doubt that was why Mance had chosen them. The defenders of Castle Black would include blind Maester Aemon and his half-blind steward Clydas, one-armed Donal Noye, drunken Septon Cellador, Deaf Dick Follard, Three-Finger Hobb the cook, old Ser Wynton Stout, as well as Halder and Toad and Pyp and Albett and the rest of the boys who'd trained with Jon. And commanding them would be red-faced Bowen Marsh, the plump Lord Steward who had been made castellan in Lord Mormont's absence. Dolorous Edd sometimes called Marsh "the Old Pomegranate," which fit him just as well as "the Old Bear" fit Mormont. "He's the man you want in front when the foes are in the field," Edd would say in his usual dour voice. "He'll count them right up for you. A regular demon for counting, that one."

If the Magnar takes Castle Black unawares, it will be red slaughter, boys butchered in their beds before they know they are under attack. Jon had to warn them, but how? He was never sent out to forage or hunt, nor allowed to stand a watch alone. And he feared for Ygritte as well. He could not take her, but if he left her, would the Magnar make her answer for his treachery? *Two hearts that beat as one . . .*

They shared the same sleeping skins every night, and he went to sleep with her head against his chest and her red hair tickling his chin. The smell of her had become a part of him. Her crooked teeth, the feel of her breast when he cupped it in his hand, the taste of her mouth . . . they were his joy and his despair. Many a night he lay with Ygritte warm beside him, wondering if his lord father had felt this confused about his mother, whoever she had been. *Ygritte set the trap and Mance Rayder pushed me into it.*

Every day he spent among the wildlings made what he had to do that much harder. He was going to have to find some way to betray these men, and when he did they would die. He did not want their friendship, any more than he wanted Ygritte's love. And yet . . . the Thenns spoke the Old

Tongue and seldom talked to Jon at all, but it was different with Jarl's raiders, the men who'd climbed the Wall. Jon was coming to know them despite himself: gaunt, quiet Errok and gregarious Grigg the Goat, the boys Quort and Bodger, Hempen Dan the ropemaker. The worst of the lot was Del, a horsefaced youth near Jon's own age, who would talk dreamily of this wildling girl he meant to steal. "She's lucky, like your Ygritte. She's kissed by fire."

Jon had to bite his tongue. He didn't want to know about Del's girl or Bodger's mother, the place by the sea that Henk the Helm came from, how Grigg yearned to visit the green men on the Isle of Faces, or the time a moose had chased Toefinger up a tree. He didn't want to hear about the boil on Big Boil's arse, how much ale Stone Thumbs could drink, or how Quort's little brother had begged him not to go with Jarl. Quort could not have been older than fourteen, though he'd already stolen himself a wife and had a child on the way. "Might be he'll be born in some castle," the boy boasted. "Born in a castle like a lord!" He was very taken with the "castles" they'd seen, by which he meant watchtowers.

Jon wondered where Ghost was now. Had he gone to Castle Black, or was he was running with some wolfpack in the woods? He had no sense of the direwolf, not even in his dreams. It made him feel as if part of himself had been cut off. Even with Ygritte sleeping beside him, he felt alone. He did not want to die alone.

By that afternoon the trees had begun to thin, and they marched east over gently rolling plains. Grass rose waist high around them, and stands of wild wheat swayed gently when the wind came gusting, but for the most part the day was warm and bright. Toward sunset, however, clouds began to threaten in the west. They soon engulfed the orange sun, and Lenn foretold a bad storm coming. His mother was a woods witch, so all the raiders agreed he had a gift for foretelling the weather. "There's a village close," Grigg the Goat told the Magnar. "Two miles, three. We could shelter there." Styr agreed at once.

It was well past dark and the storm was raging by the time they reached the place. The village sat beside a lake, and had been so long abandoned that most of the houses had collapsed. Even the small timber inn that must once have been a welcome sight for travelers stood half-fallen and roofless.

We will find scant shelter here, Jon thought gloomily. Whenever the lightning flashed he could see a stone roundtower rising from an island out in the lake, but without boats they had no way to reach it.

Errok and Del had crept ahead to scout the ruins, but Del was back almost at once. Styr halted the column and sent a dozen of his Thenns trotting forward, spears in hand. By then Jon had seen it too: the glimmer of a fire, reddening the chimney of the inn. *We are not alone*. Dread coiled inside him like a snake. He heard a horse neigh, and then shouts. *Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them*, Qhorin had said.

But the fighting was done. “There’s only one of them,” Errok said when he came back. “An old man with a horse.”

The Magnar shouted commands in the Old Tongue and a score of his Thenns spread out to establish a perimeter around the village, whilst others went prowling through the houses to make certain no one else was hiding amongst the weeds and tumbled stones. The rest crowded into the roofless inn, jostling each other to get closer to the hearth. The broken branches the old man had been burning seemed to generate more smoke than heat, but any warmth was welcome on such a wild rainy night. Two of the Thenns had thrown the man to the ground and were going through his things. Another held his horse, while three more looted his saddlebags.

Jon walked away. A rotten apple squished beneath his heel. *Styr will kill him*. The Magnar had said as much at Greyguard; any kneelers they met were to be put to death at once, to make certain they could not raise the alarm. *Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them*. Did that mean he must stand mute and helpless while they slit an old man’s throat?

Near the edge of the village, Jon came face-to-face with one of the guards Styr had posted. The Thenn growled something in the Old Tongue and pointed his spear back toward the inn. *Get back where you belong*, Jon guessed. *But where is that?*

He walked towards the water, and discovered an almost dry spot beneath the leaning daub-and-wattle wall of a tumbledown cottage that had mostly tumbled down. That was where Ygritte found him sitting, staring off across the rain-whipped lake. “I know this place,” he told her when she sat beside

him. “That tower . . . look at the top of it the next time the lightning flashes, and tell me what you see.”

“Aye, if you like,” she said, and then, “Some o’ the Thenns are saying they heard noises out there. Shouting, they say.”

“Thunder.”

“They say shouting. Might be it’s ghosts.”

The holdfast did have a grim haunted look, standing there black against the storm on its rocky island with the rain lashing at the lake all around it. “We could go out and take a look,” he suggested. “I doubt we could get much wetter than we are.”

“Swimming? In the storm?” She laughed at the notion. “Is this a trick t’ get the clothes off me, Jon Snow?”

“Do I need a trick for that now?” he teased. “Or is that you can’t swim a stroke?” Jon was a strong swimmer himself, having learned the art as a boy in Winterfell’s great moat.

Ygritte punched his arm. “You know nothing, Jon Snow. I’m half a fish, I’ll have you know.”

“Half fish, half goat, half horse . . . there’s too many halves to you, Ygritte.” He shook his head. “We wouldn’t need to swim, if this is the place I think. We could walk.”

She pulled back and gave him a look. “Walk on water? What southron sorcery is that?”

“No sorc—” he began, as a huge bolt of lightning stabbed down from the sky and touched the surface of the lake. For half a heartbeat the world was noonday bright. The clap of thunder was so loud that Ygritte gasped and covered her ears.

“Did you look?” Jon asked, as the sound rolled away and the night turned black again. “Did you see?”

“Yellow,” she said. “Is that what you meant? Some o’ them standing stones on top were yellow.”

“We call them merlons. They were painted gold a long time ago. This is Queenscrown.”

Across the lake, the tower was black again, a dim shape dimly seen. “A queen lived there?” asked Ygritte.

“A queen stayed there for a night.” Old Nan had told him the story, but Maester Luwin had confirmed most of it. “Alysanne, the wife of King Jaehaerys the Conciliator. He’s called the Old King because he reigned so long, but he was young when he first came to the Iron Throne. In those days, it was his wont to travel all over the realm. When he came to Winterfell, he brought his queen, six dragons, and half his court. The king had matters to discuss with his Warden of the North, and Alysanne grew bored, so she mounted her dragon Silverwing and flew north to see the Wall. This village was one of the places where she stopped. Afterward the smallfolk painted the top of their holdfast to look like the golden crown she’d worn when she spent the night among them.”

“I have never seen a dragon.”

“No one has. The last dragons died a hundred years ago or more. But this was before that.”

“Queen Alysanne, you say?”

“Good Queen Alysanne, they called her later. One of the castles on the Wall was named for her as well. Queensgate. Before her visit they called it Snowgate.”

“If she was so good, she should have torn that Wall down.”

No, he thought. *The Wall protects the realm. From the Others . . . and from you and your kind as well, sweetling.* “I had another friend who dreamed of dragons. A dwarf. He told me—”

“*JON SNOW!*” One of the Thenns loomed above them, frowning. “Magnar wants.” Jon thought it might have been the same man who’d found him outside the cave, the night before they climbed the Wall, but he could not be sure. He got to his feet. Ygritte came with him, which always made Styr frown, but whenever he tried to dismiss her she would remind him that she was a free woman, not a kneeler. She came and went as she pleased.

They found the Magnar standing beneath the tree that grew through the floor of the common room. His captive knelt before the hearth, encircled by

wooden spears and bronze swords. He watched Jon approach, but did not speak. The rain was running down the walls and pattering against the last few leaves that still clung to the tree, while smoke swirled thick from the fire.

“He must die,” Styr the Magnar said. “Do it, crow.”

The old man said no word. He only looked at Jon, standing amongst the wildlings. Amidst the rain and smoke, lit only by the fire, he could not have seen that Jon was all in black, but for his sheepskin cloak. *Or could he?*

Jon drew Longclaw from its sheath. Rain washed the steel, and the firelight traced a sullen orange line along the edge. *Such a small fire, to cost a man his life.* He remembered what Qhorin Halfhand had said when they spied the fire in the Skirling Pass. *Fire is life up here*, he told them, *but it can be death as well.* That was high in the Frostfangs, though, in the lawless wild beyond the Wall. This was the Gift, protected by the Night’s Watch and the power of Winterfell. A man should have been free to build a fire here, without dying for it.

“Why do you hesitate?” Styr said. “Kill him, and be done.”

Even then the captive did not speak. “Mercy,” he might have said, or “You have taken my horse, my coin, my food, let me keep my life,” or “No, please, I have done you no harm.” He might have said a thousand things, or wept, or called upon his gods. No words would save him now, though. Perhaps he knew that. So he held his tongue, and looked at Jon in accusation and appeal.

You must not balk, whatever is asked of you. Ride with them, eat with them, fight with them . . . But this old man had offered no resistance. He had been unlucky, that was all. Who he was, where he came from, where he meant to go on his sorry sway-backed horse . . . none of it mattered.

He is an old man, Jon told himself. *Fifty, maybe even sixty. He lived a longer life than most. The Thenns will kill him anyway, nothing I can say or do will save him.* Longclaw seemed heavier than lead in his hand, too heavy to lift. The man kept staring at him, with eyes as big and black as wells. *I will fall into those eyes and drown.* The Magnar was looking at him too, and he could almost taste the mistrust. *The man is dead. What matter if it is my hand that slays him?* One cut would do it, quick and clean. Longclaw was

forged of Valyrian steel. *Like Ice*. Jon remembered another killing; the deserter on his knees, his head rolling, the brightness of blood on snow . . . his father's sword, his father's words, his father's face . . .

"Do it, Jon Snow," Ygritte urged. "You must. T' prove you are no crow, but one o' the free folk."

"An old man sitting by a fire?"

"Orell was sitting by a fire too. You killed him quick enough." The look she gave him then was hard. "You meant t' kill me too, till you saw I was a woman. And I was asleep."

"That was different. You were soldiers . . . sentries."

"Aye, and you crows didn't want t' be seen. No more'n we do, now. It's just the same. Kill him."

He turned his back on the man. "No."

The Magnar moved closer, tall, cold, and dangerous. "I say yes. I command here."

"You command Thenns," Jon told him, "not free folk."

"I see no free folk. I see a crow and a crow wife."

"I'm no crow wife!" Ygritte snatched her knife from its sheath. Three quick strides, and she yanked the old man's head back by the hair and opened his throat from ear to ear. Even in death, the man did not cry out. "You know *nothing*, Jon Snow!" she shouted at him, and flung the bloody blade at his feet.

The Magnar said something in the Old Tongue. He might have been telling the Thenns to kill Jon where he stood, but he would never know the truth of that. Lightning crashed down from the sky, a searing blue-white bolt that touched the top of the tower in the lake. They could smell the fury of it, and when the thunder came it seemed to shake the night.

And death leapt down amongst them.

The lightning flash left Jon night-blind, but he glimpsed the hurtling shadow half a heartbeat before he heard the shriek. The first Thenn died as the old man had, blood gushing from his torn throat. Then the light was gone and the shape was spinning away, snarling, and another man went

down in the dark. There were curses, shouts, howls of pain. Jon saw Big Boil stumble backward and knock down three men behind him. *Ghost*, he thought for one mad instant. *Ghost leapt the Wall*. Then the lightning turned the night to day, and he saw the wolf standing on Del's chest, blood running black from his jaws. *Grey. He's grey.*

Darkness descended with the thunderclap. The Thenns were jabbing with their spears as the wolf darted between them. The old man's mare reared, maddened by the smell of slaughter, and lashed out with her hooves. Longclaw was still in his hand. All at once Jon Snow knew he would never get a better chance.

He cut down the first man as he turned toward the wolf, shoved past a second, slashed at a third. Through the madness he heard someone call his name, but whether it was Ygritte or the Magnar he could not say. The Thenn fighting to control the horse never saw him. Longclaw was feather-light. He swung at the back of the man's calf, and felt the steel bite down to the bone. When the wildling fell the mare bolted, but somehow Jon managed to grab her mane with his off hand and vault himself onto her back. A hand closed round his ankle, and he hacked down and saw Bodger's face dissolve in a welter of blood. The horse reared, lashing out. One hoof caught a Thenn in the temple, with a *crunch*.

And then they were running. Jon made no effort to guide the horse. It was all he could do to stay on her as they plunged through mud and rain and thunder. Wet grass whipped at his face and a spear flew past his ear. *If the horse stumbles and breaks a leg, they will run me down and kill me*, he thought, but the old gods were with him and the horse did not stumble. Lightning shivered through the black dome of sky, and thunder rolled across the plains. The shouts dwindled and died behind him.

Long hours later, the rain stopped. Jon found himself alone in a sea of tall black grass. There was a deep throbbing ache in his right thigh. When he looked down, he was surprised to see an arrow jutting out the back of it. *When did that happen?* He grabbed hold of the shaft and gave it a tug, but the arrowhead was sunk deep in the meat of his leg, and the pain when he pulled on it was excruciating. He tried to think back on the madness at the inn, but all he could remember was the beast, gaunt and grey and terrible. *It was too large to be a common wolf. A direwolf, then. It had to be.* He had

never seen an animal move so fast. *Like a grey wind* . . . Could Robb have returned to the north?

Jon shook his head. He had no answers. It was too hard to think . . . about the wolf, the old man, Ygritte, any of it . . .

Clumsily, he slid down off the mare's back. His wounded leg buckled under him, and he had to swallow a scream. *This is going to be agony*. The arrow had to come out, though, and nothing good could come of waiting. Jon curled his hand around the fletching, took a deep breath, and shoved the arrow forward. He grunted, then cursed. It hurt so much he had to stop. *I am bleeding like a butchered pig*, he thought, but there was nothing to be done for it until the arrow was out. He grimaced and tried again . . . and soon stopped again, trembling. *Once more*. This time he screamed, but when he was done the arrowhead was poking through the front of his thigh. Jon pushed back his bloody breeches to get a better grip, grimaced, and slowly drew the shaft through his leg. How he got through that without fainting he never knew.

He lay on the ground afterward, clutching his prize and bleeding quietly, too weak to move. After a while, he realized that if he did not *make* himself move he was like to bleed to death. Jon crawled to the shallow stream where the mare was drinking, washed his thigh in the cold water, and bound it tight with a strip of cloth torn from his cloak. He washed the arrow too, turning it in his hands. Was the fletching grey, or white? Ygritte fletched her arrows with pale grey goose feathers. *Did she loose a shaft at me as I fled?* Jon could not blame her for that. He wondered if she'd been aiming for him or the horse. If the mare had gone down, he would have been doomed. "A lucky thing my leg got in the way," he muttered.

He rested for a while to let the horse graze. She did not wander far. That was good. Hobbled with a bad leg, he could never have caught her. It was all he could do to force himself back to his feet and climb onto her back. *How did I ever mount her before, without saddle or stirrups, and a sword in one hand?* That was another question he could not answer.

Thunder rumbled softly in the distance, but above him the clouds were breaking up. Jon searched the sky until he found the Ice Dragon, then turned the mare north for the Wall and Castle Black. The throb of pain in

his thigh muscle made him wince as he put his heels into the old man's horse. *I am going home*, he told himself. But if that was true, why did he feel so hollow?

He rode till dawn, while the stars stared down like eyes.