



## JON

Ghost was gone when the wildings led their horses from the cave. *Did he understand about Castle Black?* Jon took a breath of the crisp morning air and allowed himself to hope. The eastern sky was pink near the horizon and pale grey higher up. The Sword of the Morning still hung in the south, the bright white star in its hilt blazing like a diamond in the dawn, but the blacks and greys of the darkling forest were turning once again to greens and golds, reds and russets. And above the soldier pines and oaks and ash and sentinels stood the Wall, the ice pale and glimmering beneath the dust and dirt that pocked its surface.

The Magnar sent a dozen men riding west and a dozen more east, to climb the highest hills they could find and watch for any sign of rangers in the wood or riders on the high ice. The Thenns carried bronze-banded warhorns to give warning should the Watch be sighted. The other wildings fell in behind Jarl, Jon and Ygritte with the rest. This was to be the young raider's hour of glory.

The Wall was often said to stand seven hundred feet high, but Jarl had found a place where it was both higher and lower. Before them, the ice rose sheer from out of the trees like some immense cliff, crowned by wind-carved battlements that loomed at least eight hundred feet high, perhaps nine hundred in spots. But that was deceptive, Jon realized as they drew

closer. Brandon the Builder had laid his huge foundation blocks along the heights wherever feasible, and hereabouts the hills rose wild and rugged.

He had once heard his uncle Benjen say that the Wall was a sword east of Castle Black, but a snake to the west. It was true. Sweeping in over one huge humped hill, the ice dipped down into a valley, climbed the knife edge of a long granite ridgeline for a league or more, ran along a jagged crest, dipped again into a valley deeper still, and then rose higher and higher, leaping from hill to hill as far as the eye could see, into the mountainous west.

Jarl had chosen to assault the stretch of ice along the ridge. Here, though the top of the Wall loomed eight hundred feet above the forest floor, a good third of that height was earth and stone rather than ice; the slope was too steep for their horses, almost as difficult a scramble as the Fist of the First Men, but still vastly easier to ascend than the sheer vertical face of the Wall itself. And the ridge was densely wooded as well, offering easy concealment. Once brothers in black had gone out every day with axes to cut back the encroaching trees, but those days were long past, and here the forest grew right up to the ice.

The day promised to be damp and cold, and damper and colder by the Wall, beneath those tons of ice. The closer they got, the more the Thenns held back. *They have never seen the Wall before, not even the Magnar*, Jon realized. *It frightens them.* In the Seven Kingdoms it was said that the Wall marked the end of the world. *That is true for them as well.* It was all in where you stood.

*And where do I stand?* Jon did not know. To stay with Ygritte, he would need to become a wildling heart and soul. If he abandoned her to return to his duty, the Magnar might cut her heart out. And if he took her with him . . . assuming she would go, which was far from certain . . . well, he could scarcely bring her back to Castle Black to live among the brothers. A deserter and a wildling could expect no welcome anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms. *We could go look for Gendel's children, I suppose. Though they'd be more like to eat us than to take us in.*

The Wall did not awe Jarl's raiders, Jon saw. *They have done this before, every man of them.* Jarl called out names when they dismounted beneath the

ridge, and eleven gathered round him. All were young. The oldest could not have been more than five-and-twenty, and two of the ten were younger than Jon. Every one was lean and hard, though; they had a look of sinewy strength that reminded him of Stonesnake, the brother the Halfhand had sent off afoot when Rattleshirt was hunting them.

In the very shadow of the Wall the wildlings made ready, winding thick coils of hempen rope around one shoulder and down across their chests, and lacing on queer boots of supple doeskin. The boots had spikes jutting from the toes; iron, for Jarl and two others, bronze for some, but most often jagged bone. Small stone-headed hammers hung from one hip, a leathern bag of stakes from the other. Their ice axes were antlers with sharpened tines, bound to wooden hafts with strips of hide. The eleven climbers sorted themselves into three teams of four; Jarl himself made the twelfth man. “Mance promises swords for every man of the first team to reach the top,” he told them, his breath misting in the cold air. “Southron swords of castle-forged steel. And your name in the song he’ll make of this, that too. What more could a free man ask? *Up*, and the Others take the hindmost!”

*The Others take them all*, thought Jon, as he watched them scramble up the steep slope of the ridge and vanish beneath the trees. It would not be the first time wildlings had scaled the Wall, not even the hundred and first. The patrols stumbled on climbers two or three times a year, and rangers sometimes came on the broken corpses of those who had fallen. Along the east coast the raiders most often built boats to slip across the Bay of Seals. In the west they would descend into the black depths of the Gorge to make their way around the Shadow Tower. But in between the only way to defeat the Wall was to go over it, and many a raider had. *Fewer come back, though*, he thought with a certain grim pride. Climbers must of necessity leave their mounts behind, and many younger, greener raiders began by taking the first horses they found. Then a hue and cry would go up, ravens would fly, and as often as not the Night’s Watch would hunt them down and hang them before they could get back with their plunder and stolen women. Jarl would not make that mistake, Jon knew, but he wondered about Styr. *The Magnar is a ruler, not a raider. He may not know how the game is played.*

“There they are,” Ygritte said, and Jon glanced up to see the first climber emerge above the treetops. It was Jarl. He had found a sentinel tree that leaned against the Wall, and led his men up the trunk to get a quicker start. *The wood should never have been allowed to creep so close. They’re three hundred feet up, and they haven’t touched the ice itself yet.*

He watched the wildling move carefully from wood to Wall, hacking out a handhold with short sharp blows of his ice axe, then swinging over. The rope around his waist tied him to the second man in line, still edging up the tree. Step by slow step, Jarl moved higher, kicking out toeholds with his spiked boots when there were no natural ones to be found. When he was ten feet above the sentinel, he stopped upon a narrow icy ledge, slung his axe from his belt, took out his hammer, and drove an iron stake into a cleft. The second man moved onto the Wall behind him while the third was scrambling to the top of the tree.

The other two teams had no happily placed trees to give them a leg up, and before long the Thenns were wondering whether they had gotten lost climbing the ridge. Jarl’s party were all on the Wall and eighty feet up before the leading climbers from the other groups came into view. The teams were spaced a good twenty yards apart. Jarl’s four were in the center. To the right of them was a team headed up by Grigg the Goat, whose long blond braid made him easy to spot from below. To the left a very thin man named Errok led the climbers.

“So slow,” the Magnar complained loudly, as he watched them edge their way upward. “Has he forgotten the crows? He should climb faster, afore we are discovered.”

Jon had to hold his tongue. He remembered the Skirling Pass all too well, and the moonlight climb he’d made with Stonesnake. He had swallowed his heart a half-dozen times that night, and by the end his arms and legs had been aching and his fingers were half frozen. *And that was stone, not ice.* Stone was solid. Ice was treacherous stuff at the best of times, and on a day like this, when the Wall was weeping, the warmth of a climber’s hand might be enough to melt it. The huge blocks could be frozen rock-hard inside, but their outer surface would be slick, with runnels of water trickling down, and patches of rotten ice where the air had gotten in. *Whatever else the wildlings are, they’re brave.*

All the same, Jon found himself hoping that Styr's fears proved well founded. *If the gods are good, a patrol will chance by and put an end to this.* "No wall can keep you safe," his father had told him once, as they walked the walls of Winterfall. "A wall is only as strong as the men who defend it." The wildlings might have a hundred and twenty men, but four defenders would be enough to see them off, with a few well-placed arrows and perhaps a pail of stones.

No defenders appeared, however; not four, not even one. The sun climbed the sky and the wildlings climbed the Wall. Jarl's four remained well ahead till noon, when they hit a pitch of bad ice. Jarl had looped his rope around a wind-carved pinnacle and was using it to support his weight when the whole jagged thing suddenly crumbled and came crashing down, and him with it. Chunks of ice as big as a man's head bombarded the three below, but they clung to the handholds and the stakes held, and Jarl jerked to a sudden halt at the end of the rope.

By the time his team had recovered from that mischance, Grigg the Goat had almost drawn even with them. Errok's four remained well behind. The face where they were climbing looked smooth and unpitted, covered with a sheet of icemelt that glistened wetly where the sun brushed it. Grigg's section was darker to the eye, with more obvious features; long horizontal ledges where a block had been imperfectly positioned atop the block below, cracks and crevices, even chimneys along the vertical joins, where wind and water had eaten holes large enough for a man to hide in.

Jarl soon had his men edging upward again. His four and Grigg's moved almost side by side, with Errok's fifty feet below. Deerhorn axes chopped and hacked, sending showers of glittery shards cascading down onto the trees. Stone hammers pounded stakes deep into the ice to serve as anchors for the ropes; the iron stakes ran out before they were halfway up, and after that the climbers used horn and sharpened bone. And the men kicked, driving the spikes on their boots against the hard unyielding ice again and again and again to make one foothold. *Their legs must be numb,* Jon thought by the fourth hour. *How long can they keep on with that?* He watched as restless as the Magnar, listening for the distant moan of a Thenn warhorn. But the horns stayed silent, and there was no sign of the Night's Watch.

By the sixth hour, Jarl had moved ahead of Grigg the Goat again, and his men were widening the gap. “The Mance’s pet must want a sword,” the Magnar said, shading his eyes. The sun was high in the sky, and the upper third of the Wall was a crystalline blue from below, reflecting so brilliantly that it hurt the eyes to look on it. Jarl’s four and Grigg’s were all but lost in the glare, though Errok’s team was still in shadow. Instead of moving upward they were edging their way sideways at about five hundred feet, making for a chimney. Jon was watching them inch along when he heard the sound—a sudden *crack* that seemed to roll along the ice, followed by a shout of alarm. And then the air was full of shards and shrieks and falling men, as a sheet of ice a foot thick and fifty feet square broke off from the Wall and came tumbling, crumbling, rumbling, sweeping all before it. Even down at the foot of the ridge, some chunks came spinning through the trees and rolling down the slope. Jon grabbed Ygritte and pulled her down to shield her, and one of the Thenns was struck in the face by a chunk that broke his nose.

And when they looked up Jarl and his team were gone. Men, ropes, stakes, all gone; nothing remained above six hundred feet. There was a wound in the Wall where the climbers had clung half a heartbeat before, the ice within as smooth and white as polished marble and shining in the sun. Far far below there was a faint red smear where someone had smashed against a frozen pinnacle.

*The Wall defends itself*, Jon thought as he pulled Ygritte back to her feet.

They found Jarl in a tree, impaled upon a splintered branch and still roped to the three men who lay broken beneath him. One was still alive, but his legs and spine were shattered, and most of his ribs as well. “Mercy,” he said when they came upon him. One of the Thenns smashed his head in with a big stone mace. The Magnar gave orders, and his men began to gather fuel for a pyre.

The dead were burning when Grigg the Goat reached the top of the Wall. By the time Errok’s four had joined them, nothing remained of Jarl and his team but bone and ash.

The sun had begun to sink by then, so the climbers wasted little time. They unwound the long coils of hemp they’d had looped around their

chests, tied them all together, and tossed down one end. The thought of trying to climb five hundred feet up that rope filled Jon with dread, but Mance had planned better than that. The raiders Jarl had left below uncasked a huge ladder, with rungs of woven hemp as thick as a man's arm, and tied it to the climbers' rope. Errok and Grigg and their men grunted and heaved, pulled it up, staked it to the top, then lowered the rope again to haul up a second ladder. There were five altogether.

When all of them were in place, the Magnar shouted a brusque command in the Old Tongue, and five of his Thenns started up together. Even with the ladders, it was no easy climb. Ygritte watched them struggle for a while. "I hate this Wall," she said in a low angry voice. "Can you feel how *cold* it is?"

"It's made of ice," Jon pointed out.

"You know nothing, Jon Snow. This wall is made o' blood."

Nor had it drunk its fill. By sunset, two of the Thenns had fallen from the ladder to their deaths, but they were the last. It was near midnight before Jon reached the top. The stars were out again, and Ygritte was trembling from the climb. "I almost fell," she said, with tears in her eyes. "Twice. Thrice. The Wall was trying t' shake me off, I could feel it." One of the tears broke free and trickled slowly down her cheek.

"The worst is behind us." Jon tried to sound confident. "Don't be frightened." He tried to put an arm around her.

Ygritte slammed the heel of her hand into his chest, so hard it stung even through his layers of wool, mail, and boiled leather. "I wasn't *frightened*. You know nothing, Jon Snow."

"Why are you crying, then?"

"Not for fear!" She kicked savagely at the ice beneath her with a heel, chopping out a chunk. "I'm crying because we never found the Horn of Winter. We opened half a hundred graves and let all those shades loose in the world, and never found the Horn of Joramun to bring this cold thing down!"