

JON

It was dark in the Skirling Pass. The great stone flanks of the mountains hid the sun for most of the day, so they rode in shadow, the breath of man and horse steaming in the cold air. Icy fingers of water trickled down from the snowpack above into small frozen pools that cracked and broke beneath the hooves of their garrons. Sometimes they would see a few weeds struggling from some crack in the rock or a splotch of pale lichen, but there was no grass, and they were above the trees now.

The track was as steep as it was narrow, wending its way ever upward. Where the pass was so constricted that rangers had to go single file, Squire Dalbridge would take the lead, scanning the heights as he went, his longbow ever close to hand. It was said he had the keenest eyes in the Night's Watch.

Ghost padded restlessly by Jon's side. From time to time he would stop and turn, his ears pricked, as if he heard something behind them. Jon did not think the shadowcats would attack living men, not unless they were starving, but he loosened Longclaw in its scabbard even so.

A wind-carved arch of grey stone marked the highest point of the pass. Here the way broadened as it began its long descent toward the valley of the Milkwater. Qhorin decreed that they would rest here until the shadows began to grow again. "Shadows are friends to men in black," he said.

Jon saw the sense of that. It would be pleasant to ride in the light for a time, to let the bright mountain sun soak through their cloaks and chase the chill from their bones, but they dared not. Where there were three watchers there might be others, waiting to sound the alarm.

Stonesnake curled up under his ragged fur cloak and was asleep almost at once. Jon shared his salt beef with Ghost while Ebben and Squire Dalbridge fed the horses. Qhorin Halfhand sat with his back to a rock, honing the edge of his longsword with long slow strokes. Jon watched the

ranger for a few moments, then summoned his courage and went to him. “My lord,” he said, “you never asked me how it went. With the girl.”

“I am no lord, Jon Snow.” Qhorin slid the stone smoothly along the steel with his two-fingered hand.

“She told me Mance would take me, if I ran with her.”

“She told you true.”

“She even claimed we were kin. She told me a story...”

“...of Bael the Bard and the rose of Winterfell. So Stonesnake told me. It happens I know the song. Mance would sing it of old, when he came back from a ranging. He had a passion for wildling music. Aye, and for their women as well.”

“You knew him?”

“We all knew him.” His voice was sad.

They were friends as well as brothers, Jon realized, *and now they are sworn foes*. “Why did he desert?”

“For a wench, some say. For a crown, others would have it.” Qhorin tested the edge of his sword with the ball of his thumb. “He liked women, Mance did, and he was not a man whose knees bent easily, that’s true. But it was more than that. He loved the wild better than the Wall. It was in his blood. He was wildling born, taken as a child when some raiders were put to the sword. When he left the Shadow Tower he was only going home again.”

“Was he a good ranger?”

“He was the best of us,” said the Halfhand, “and the worst as well. Only fools like Thoren Smallwood despise the wildlings. They are as brave as we are, Jon. As strong, as quick, as clever. But they have no discipline. They name themselves the free folk, and each one thinks himself as good as a king and wiser than a maester. Mance was the same. He never learned how to obey.”

“No more than me,” said Jon quietly.

Qhorin's shrewd grey eyes seemed to see right through him. "So you let her go?" He did not sound the least surprised.

"You know?"

"Now. Tell me why you spared her."

It was hard to put into words. "My father never used a headsman. He said he owed it to men he killed to look into their eyes and hear their last words. And when I looked into Ygritte's eyes, I..." Jon stared down at his hands helplessly. "I know she was an enemy, but there was no evil in her."

"No more than in the other two."

"It was their lives or ours Jon said. "If they had seen us, if they had sounded that horn..."

"The wildlings would hunt us down and slay us, true enough."

"Stonesnake has the horn now, though, and we took Ygritte's knife and axe. She's behind us, afoot, unarmed..."

"And not like to be a threat," Qhorin agreed. "If I had needed her dead, I would have left her with Ebben, or done the thing myself."

"Then why did you command it of me?"

"I did not command it. I told you to do what needed to be done, and left you to decide what that would be." Qhorin stood and slid his longsword back into its scabbard. "When I want a mountain scaled, I call on Stonesnake. Should I need to put an arrow through the eye of some foe across a windy battlefield, I summon Squire Dalbridge. Ebben can make any man give up his secrets. To lead men you must know them, Jon Snow. I know more of you now than I did this morning."

"And if I had slain her?" asked Jon.

"She would be dead, and I would know you better than I had before. But enough talk. You ought be sleeping. We have leagues to go, and dangers to face. You will need your strength."

Jon did not think sleep would come easily, but he knew the Halfhand was right. He found a place out of the wind, beneath an overhang of rock, and took off his cloak to use it for a blanket. "Ghost," he called. "Here. To

me.” He always slept better with the great white wolf beside him; there was comfort in the smell of him, and welcome warmth in that shaggy pale fur. This time, though, Ghost did no more than look at him. Then he turned away and padded around the garrons, and quick as that he was gone. *He wants to hunt*, Jon thought. Perhaps there were goats in these mountains. The shadowcats must live on something. “Just don’t try and bring down a ’cat,” he muttered. Even for a direwolf, that would be dangerous. He tugged his cloak over him and stretched out beneath the rock.

When he closed his eyes, he dreamed of direwolves.

There were five of them when there should have been six, and they were scattered, each apart from the others. He felt a deep ache of emptiness, a sense of incompleteness. The forest was vast and cold, and they were so small, so lost. His brothers were out there somewhere, and his sister, but he had lost their scent. He sat on his haunches and lifted his head to the darkening sky, and his cry echoed through the forest, a long lonely mournful sound. As it died away, he pricked up his ears, listening for an answer, but the only sound was the sigh of blowing snow.

Jon?

The call came from behind him, softer than a whisper, but strong too. Can a shout be silent? He turned his head, searching for his brother, for a glimpse of a lean grey shape moving beneath the trees, but there was nothing, only...

A weirwood.

It seemed to sprout from solid rock, its pale roots twisting up from a myriad of fissures and hairline cracks. The tree was slender compared to other weirwoods he had seen, no more than a sapling, yet it was growing as he watched, its limbs thickening as they reached for the sky. Wary, he circled the smooth white trunk until he came to the face. Red eyes looked at him. Fierce eyes they were, yet glad to see him. The weirwood had his brother’s face. Had his brother always had three eyes?

Not always, came the silent shout. *Not before the crow.*

He sniffed at the bark, smelled wolf and tree and boy, but behind that there were other scents, the rich brown smell of warm earth and the hard grey smell of stone and something else, something terrible. Death, he knew. He was smelling death. He cringed back, his hair bristling, and bared his fangs.

Don't be afraid, I like it in the dark. No one can see you, but you can see them. But first you have to open your eyes. See? Like this. And the tree reached down and touched him.

And suddenly he was back in the mountains, his paws sunk deep in a drift of snow as he stood upon the edge of a great precipice. Before him the Skirling Pass opened up into airy emptiness, and a long vee-shaped valley lay spread beneath him like a quilt, awash in all the colors of an autumn afternoon.

A vast blue-white wall plugged one end of the vale, squeezing between the mountains as if it had shouldered them aside, and for a moment he thought he had dreamed himself back to Castle Black. Then he realized he was looking at a river of ice several thousand feet high. Under that glittering cold cliff was a great lake, its deep cobalt waters reflecting the snowcapped peaks that ringed it. There were men down in the valley, he saw now; many men, thousands, a huge host. Some were tearing great holes in the half-frozen ground, while others trained for war. He watched as a swarming mass of riders charged a shield wall, astride horses no larger than ants. The sound of their mock battle was a rustling of steel leaves, drifting faintly on the wind. Their encampment had no plan to it; he saw no ditches, no sharpened stakes, no neat rows of horse lines. Everywhere crude earthen shelters and hide tents sprouted haphazardly, like a pox on the face of the earth. He spied untidy mounds of hay, smelled goats and sheep, horses and pigs, dogs in great profusion. Tendrils of dark smoke rose from a thousand cookfires.

This is no army, no more than it is a town. This is a whole people come together.

Across the long lake, one of the mounds moved. He watched it more closely and saw that it was not dirt at all, but alive, a shaggy lumbering

beast with a snake for a nose and tusks larger than those of the greatest boar that had ever lived. And the thing riding it was huge as well, and his shape was wrong, too thick in the leg and hips to be a man.

Then a sudden gust of cold made his fur stand up, and the air thrilled to the sound of wings. As he lifted his eyes to the ice-white mountain heights above, a shadow plummeted out of the sky. A shrill scream split the air. He glimpsed blue-grey pinions spread wide, shutting out the sun...

"*Ghost!*" Jon shouted, sitting up. He could still feel the talons, the *pain*. "Ghost, to me!"

Ebben appeared, grabbed him, shook him. "Quiet! You mean to bring the wildlings down on us? What's wrong with you, boy?"

"A dream," said Jon feebly. "I was Ghost, I was on the edge of the mountain looking down on a frozen river, and something attacked me. A bird... an eagle, I think..."

Squire Dalbridge smiled. "It's always pretty women in my dreams. Would that I dreamed more often."

Qhorin came up beside him. "A frozen river, you say?"

"The Milkwater flows from a great lake at the foot of a glacier," Stonesnake put in.

"There was a tree with my brother's face. The wildlings... there were *thousands*, more than I ever knew existed. And giants riding mammoths." From the way the light had shifted, Jon judged that he had been asleep for four or five hours. His head ached, and the back of his neck where the talons had burned through him. *But that was in the dream.*

"Tell me all that you remember, from first to last," said Qhorin Halfhand.

Jon was confused. "It was only a dream."

"A wolf dream," the Halfhand said. "Craster told the Lord Commander that the wildlings were gathering at the source of the Milkwater. That may be why you dreamed it. Or it may be that you saw what waits for us, a few hours farther on. Tell me." It made him feel half a fool to talk of such things to Qhorin and the other rangers, but he did as he was commanded. None of

the black brothers laughed at him, however. By the time he was done, even Squire Dalbridge was no longer smiling.

“Skinchanger?” said Ebben grimly, looking at the Halfhand. *Does he mean the eagle?* Jon wondered. *Or me?* Skinchangers and wargs belonged in Old Nan’s stories, not in the world he had lived in all his life. Yet here, in this strange bleak wilderness of rock and ice, it was not hard to believe.

“The cold winds are rising. Mormont feared as much. Benjen Stark felt it as well. Dead men walk and the trees have eyes again. Why should we balk at wargs and giants?”

“Does this mean my dreams are true as well?” asked Squire Dalbridge. “Lord Snow can keep his mammoths, I want my women.”

“Man and boy I’ve served the Watch, and ranged as far as any,” said Ebben. “I’ve seen the bones of giants, and heard many a queer tale, but no more. I want to see them with my own eyes.”

“Be careful they don’t see you, Ebben,” Stonesnake said.

Ghost did not reappear as they set out again. The shadows covered the floor of the pass by then, and the sun was sinking fast toward the jagged twin peaks of the huge mountain the rangers named Forktop. *If the dream was true...* Even the thought scared him. Could the eagle have hurt Ghost, or knocked him off the precipice? And what about the weirwood with his brother’s face, that smelled of death and darkness?

The last ray of sun vanished behind the peaks of Forktop. Twilight filled the Skirling Pass. It seemed to grow colder almost at once. They were no longer climbing. In fact, the ground had begun to descend, though as yet not sharply. It was littered with cracks and broken boulders and tumbled heaps of rock. *It will be dark soon, and still no sight of Ghost.* It was tearing Jon apart, yet he dare not shout for the direwolf as he would have liked. Other things might be listening as well.

“Qhorin,” Squire Dalbridge called softly. “There. Look.”

The eagle was perched on a spine of rock far above them, outlined against the darkening sky. *We’ve seen other eagles,* Jon thought. *That need not be the one I dreamed of.*

Even so, Ebben would have loosed a shaft at it, but the squire stopped him. “The bird’s well out of bowshot.”

“I don’t like it watching us.”

The squire shrugged. “Nor me, but you won’t stop it. Only waste a good arrow.”

Qhorin sat in his saddle, studying the eagle for a long time. “We press on,” he finally said. The rangers resumed their descent.

Ghost, Jon wanted to shout, *where are you?*

He was about to follow Qhorin and the others when he glimpsed a flash of white between two boulders. *A patch of old snow*, he thought, until he saw it stir. He was off his horse at once. As he went to his knees, Ghost lifted his head. His neck glistened wetly, but he made no sound when Jon peeled off a glove and touched him. The talons had torn a bloody path through fur and flesh, but the bird had not been able to snap his neck.

Qhorin Halfhand was standing over him. “How bad?”

As if in answer, Ghost struggled to his feet.

“The wolf is strong,” the ranger said. “Ebben, water. Stonesnake, your skin of wine. Hold him still, Jon.”

Together they washed the caked blood from the direwolf’s fur. Ghost struggled and bared his teeth when Qhorin poured the wine into the ragged red gashes the eagle had left him, but Jon wrapped his arms around him and murmured soothing words, and soon enough the wolf quieted. By the time they’d ripped a strip from Jon’s cloak to wrap the wounds, full dark had settled. Only a dusting of stars set the black of sky apart from the black of stone. “Do we press on?” Stonesnake wanted to know.

Qhorin went to his garron. “Back, not on.”

“Back?” Jon was taken by surprise.

“Eagles have sharper eyes than men. We are seen. So now we run.” The Halfhand wound a long black scarf around his face and swung up into the saddle.

The other rangers exchanged a look, but no man thought to argue. One by one they mounted and turned their mounts toward home. “Ghost, come,” he called, and the direwolf followed, a pale shadow moving through the night.

All night they rode, feeling their way up the twisting pass and through the stretches of broken ground. The wind grew stronger. Sometimes it was so dark that they dismounted and went ahead on foot, each man leading his garron. Once Ebben suggested that some torches might serve them well, but Qhorin said, “No fire,” and that was the end of that. They reached the stone bridge at the summit and began to descend again. Off in the darkness a shadowcat screamed in fury, its voice bouncing off the rocks so it seemed as though a dozen other ’cats were giving answer. Once Jon thought he saw a pair of glowing eyes on a ledge overhead, as big as harvest moons.

In the black hour before dawn, they stopped to let the horses drink and fed them each a handful of oats and a twist or two of hay. “We are not far from the place the wildlings died,” said Qhorin. “From there, one man could hold a hundred. The right man.” He looked at Squire Dalbridge.

The squire bowed his head. “Leave me as many arrows as you can spare, brothers.” He stroked his longbow. “And see my garron has an apple when you’re home. He’s earned it, poor beastie.”

He’s staying to die, Jon realized.

Qhorin clasped the squire’s forearm with a gloved hand. “If the eagle flies down for a look at you...”

“...he’ll sprout some new feathers.”

The last Jon saw of Squire Dalbridge was his back as he clambered up the narrow path to the heights.

When dawn broke, Jon looked up into a cloudless sky and saw a speck moving through the blue. Ebben saw it too, and cursed, but Qhorin told him to be quiet. “Listen.”

Jon held his breath, and heard it. Far away and behind them, the call of a hunting horn echoed against the mountains.

“And now they come,” said Qhorin.