



JON

The last night fell black and moonless, but for once the sky was clear. “I am going up the hill to look for Ghost,” he told the Thenns at the cave mouth, and they grunted and let him pass.

So many stars, he thought as he trudged up the slope through pines and firs and ash. Maester Luwin had taught him his stars as a boy in Winterfell; he had learned the names of the twelve houses of heaven and the rulers of each; he could find the seven wanderers sacred to the Faith; he was old friends with the Ice Dragon, the Shadowcat, the Moonmaid, and the Sword of the Morning. All those he shared with Ygritte, but not some of the others. *We look up at the same stars, and see such different things*. The King’s Crown was the Cradle, to hear her tell it; the Stallion was the Horned Lord; the red wanderer that septons preached was sacred to their Smith up here was called the Thief. And when the Thief was in the Moonmaid, that was a propitious time for a man to steal a woman, Ygritte insisted. “Like the night you stole me. The Thief was bright that night.”

“I never meant to steal you,” he said. “I never knew you were a girl until my knife was at your throat.”

“If you kill a man, and never mean t’, he’s just as dead,” Ygritte said stubbornly. Jon had never met anyone so stubborn, except maybe for his little sister Arya. *Is she still my sister?* he wondered. *Was she ever?* He had never truly been a Stark, only Lord Eddard’s motherless bastard, with no

more place at Winterfell than Theon Greyjoy. And even that he'd lost. When a man of the Night's Watch said his words, he put aside his old family and joined a new one, but Jon Snow had lost those brothers too.

He found Ghost atop the hill, as he thought he might. The white wolf never howled, yet something drew him to the heights all the same, and he would squat there on his hindquarters, hot breath rising in a white mist as his red eyes drank the stars.

"Do you have names for them as well?" Jon asked, as he went to one knee beside the direwolf and scratched the thick white fur on his neck. "The Hare? The Doe? The She-Wolf?" Ghost licked his face, his rough wet tongue rasping against the scabs where the eagle's talons had ripped Jon's cheek. *The bird marked both of us*, he thought. "Ghost," he said quietly, "on the morrow we go over. There's no steps here, no cage-and-crane, no way for me to get you to the other side. We have to part. Do you understand?"

In the dark, the direwolf's red eyes looked black. He nuzzled at Jon's neck, silent as ever, his breath a hot mist. The wildlings called Jon Snow a warg, but if so he was a poor one. He did not know how to put on a wolf skin, the way Orell had with his eagle before he'd died. Once Jon had dreamed that he was Ghost, looking down upon the valley of the Milkwater where Mance Rayder had gathered his people, and that dream had turned out to be true. But he was not dreaming now, and that left him only words.

"You cannot come with me," Jon said, cupping the wolf's head in his hands and looking deep into those eyes. "You have to go to Castle Black. Do you understand? *Castle Black*. Can you find it? The way home? Just follow the ice, east and east, into the sun, and you'll find it. They will know you at Castle Black, and maybe your coming will warn them." He had thought of writing out a warning for Ghost to carry, but he had no ink, no parchment, not even a writing quill, and the risk of discovery was too great. "I will meet you again at Castle Black, but you have to get there by yourself. We must each hunt alone for a time. *Alone*."

The direwolf twisted free of Jon's grasp, his ears pricked up. And suddenly he was bounding away. He loped through a tangle of brush, leapt a deadfall, and raced down the hillside, a pale streak among the trees. *Off to*

Castle Black? Jon wondered. *Or off after a hare?* He wished he knew. He feared he might prove just as poor a warg as a sworn brother and a spy.

A wind sighed through the trees, rich with the smell of pine needles, tugging at his faded blacks. Jon could see the Wall looming high and dark to the south, a great shadow blocking out the stars. The rough hilly ground made him think they must be somewhere between the Shadow Tower and Castle Black, and likely closer to the former. For days they had been wending their way south between deep lakes that stretched like long thin fingers along the floors of narrow valleys, while flint ridges and pine-clad hills jostled against one another to either side. Such ground made for slow riding, but offered easy concealment for those wishing to approach the Wall unseen.

For wildling raiders, he thought. *Like us. Like me.*

Beyond that Wall lay the Seven Kingdoms, and everything he had sworn to protect. He had said the words, had pledged his life and honor, and by rights he should be up there standing sentry. He should be raising a horn to his lips to rouse the Night's Watch to arms. He had no horn, though. It would not be hard to steal one from the wildlings, he suspected, but what would that accomplish? Even if he blew it, there was no one to hear. The Wall was a hundred leagues long and the Watch sadly dwindled. All but three of the strongholds had been abandoned; there might not be a brother within forty miles of here, but for Jon. If he was a brother still . . .

I should have tried to kill Mance Rayder on the Fist, even if it meant my life. That was what Qhorin Halfhand would have done. But Jon had hesitated, and the chance passed. The next day he had ridden off with Styr the Magnar, Jarl, and more than a hundred picked Thenns and raiders. He told himself that he was only biding his time, that when the moment came he would slip away and ride for Castle Black. The moment never came. They rested most nights in empty wildling villages, and Styr always set a dozen of his Thenns to guard the horses. Jarl watched him suspiciously. And Ygritte was never far, day or night.

Two hearts that beat as one. Mance Rayder's mocking words rang bitter in his head. Jon had seldom felt so confused. *I have no choice,* he'd told himself the first time, when she slipped beneath his sleeping skins. *If I*

refuse her, she will know me for a turncloak. I am playing the part the Halfhand told me to play.

His body had played the part eagerly enough. His lips on hers, his hand sliding under her doeskin shirt to find a breast, his manhood stiffening when she rubbed her mound against it through their clothes. *My vows*, he'd thought, remembering the weirwood grove where he had said them, the nine great white trees in a circle, the carved red faces watching, listening. But her fingers were undoing his laces and her tongue was in his mouth and her hand slipped inside his smallclothes and brought him out, and he could not see the weirwoods anymore, only her. She bit his neck and he nuzzled hers, burying his nose in her thick red hair. *Lucky*, he thought, *she is lucky, fire-kissed*. "Isn't that good?" she whispered as she guided him inside her. She was sopping wet down there, and no maiden, that was plain, but Jon did not care. His vows, her maidenhood, none of it mattered, only the heat of her, the mouth on his, the finger that pinched at his nipple. "Isn't that sweet?" she said again. "Not so fast, oh, slow, yes, like that. There now, there now, yes, sweet, sweet. You know nothing, Jon Snow, but I can show you. Harder now. Yessss."

A part, he tried to remind himself afterward. *I am playing a part. I had to do it once, to prove I'd abandoned my vows. I had to make her trust me.* It need never happen again. He was still a man of the Night's Watch, and a son of Eddard Stark. He had done what needed to be done, proved what needed to be proven.

The proving had been so sweet, though, and Ygritte had gone to sleep beside him with her head against his chest, and that was sweet as well, dangerously sweet. He thought of the weirwoods again, and the words he'd said before them. *It was only once, and it had to be. Even my father stumbled once, when he forgot his marriage vows and sired a bastard.* Jon vowed to himself that it would be the same with him. *It will never happen again.*

It happened twice more that night, and again in the morning, when she woke to find him hard. The wildlings were stirring by then, and several could not help but notice what was going on beneath the pile of furs. Jarl told them to be quick about it, before he had to throw a pail of water over them. *Like a pair of rutting dogs*, Jon thought afterward. Was that what he'd

become? *I am a man of the Night's Watch*, a small voice inside insisted, but every night it seemed a little fainter, and when Ygritte kissed his ears or bit his neck, he could not hear it at all. *Was this how it was for my father?* he wondered. *Was he as weak as I am, when he dishonored himself in my mother's bed?*

Something was coming up the hill behind him, he realized suddenly. For half a heartbeat he thought it might be Ghost come back, but the direwolf never made so much noise. Jon drew Longclaw in a single smooth motion, but it was only one of the Thenns, a broad man in a bronze helm. "Snow," the intruder said. "Come. Magnar wants." The men of Thenn spoke the Old Tongue, and most had only a few words of the Common.

Jon did not much care what the Magnar wanted, but there was no use arguing with someone who could scarcely understand him, so he followed the man back down the hill.

The mouth of the cave was a cleft in the rock barely wide enough for a horse, half concealed behind a soldier pine. It opened to the north, so the glows of the fires within would not be visible from the Wall. Even if by some mischance a patrol should happen to pass atop the Wall tonight, they would see nothing but hills and pines and the icy sheen of starlight on a half-frozen lake. Mance Rayder had planned his thrust well.

Within the rock, the passage descended twenty feet before it opened out onto a space as large as Winterfell's Great Hall. Cookfires burned amongst the columns, their smoke rising to blacken the stony ceiling. The horses had been hobbled along one wall, beside a shallow pool. A sinkhole in the center of the floor opened on what might have been an even greater cavern below, though the darkness made it hard to tell. Jon could hear the soft rushing sound of an underground stream somewhere below as well.

Jarl was with the Magnar; Mance had given them the joint command. Styr was none too pleased by that, Jon had noted early on. Mance Rayder had called the dark youth a "pet" of Val, who was sister to Dalla, his own queen, which made Jarl a sort of good brother once removed to the King-beyond-the-Wall. The Magnar plainly resented sharing his authority. He had brought a hundred Thenns, five times as many men as Jarl, and often acted as if he had the sole command. But it would be the younger man who got

them over the ice, Jon knew. Though he could not have been older than twenty, Jarl had been raiding for eight years, and had gone over the Wall a dozen times with the likes of Alfyn Crowkiller and the Weeper, and more recently with his own band.

The Magnar was direct. “Jarl has warned me of crows, patrolling on high. Tell me all you know of these patrols.”

Tell me, Jon noted, not *tell us*, though Jarl stood right beside him. He would have liked nothing better than to refuse the brusque demand, but he knew Styr would put him to death at the slightest disloyalty, and Ygritte as well, for the crime of being his. “There are four men in each patrol, two rangers and two builders,” he said. “The builders are supposed to make note of cracks, melting, and other structural problems, while the rangers look for signs of foes. They ride mules.”

“Mules?” The earless man frowned. “Mules are slow.”

“Slow, but more surefooted on the ice. The patrols often ride atop the Wall, and aside from Castle Black, the paths up there have not been graveled for long years. The mules are bred at Eastwatch, and specially trained to their duty.”

“They *often* ride atop the Wall? Not always?”

“No. One patrol in four follows the base instead, to search for cracks in the foundation ice or signs of tunneling.”

The Magnar nodded. “Even in far Thenn we know the tale of Arson Iceaxe and his tunnel.”

Jon knew the tale as well. Arson Iceaxe had been halfway through the Wall when his tunnel was found by rangers from the Nightfort. They did not trouble to disturb him at his digging, only sealed the way behind with ice and stone and snow. Dolorous Edd used to say that if you pressed your ear flat to the Wall, you could still hear Arson chipping away with his axe.

“When do these patrols go out? How often?”

Jon shrugged. “It changes. I’ve heard that Lord Commander Qorgyle used to send them out every third day from Castle Black to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, and every second day from Castle Black to the Shadow Tower. The Watch had more men in his day, though. Lord Commander Mormont

prefers to vary the number of patrols and the days of their departure, to make it more difficult for anyone to know their comings and goings. And sometimes the Old Bear will even send a larger force to one of the abandoned castles for a fortnight or a moon's turn." His uncle had originated that tactic, Jon knew. Anything to make the enemy unsure.

"Is Stonedoor manned at present?" asked Jarl. "Greyguard?"

So we're between those two, are we? Jon kept his face carefully blank. "Only Eastwatch, Castle Black, and the Shadow Tower were manned when I left the Wall. I can't speak to what Bowen Marsh or Ser Denys might have done since."

"How many crows remain within the castles?" asked Styr.

"Five hundred at Castle Black. Two hundred at Shadow Tower, perhaps three hundred at Eastwatch." Jon added three hundred men to the count. *If only it were that easy . . .*

Jarl was not fooled, however. "He's lying," he told Styr. "Or else including those they lost on the Fist."

"Crow," the Magnar warned, "do not take me for Mance Rayder. If you lie to me, I will have your tongue."

"I'm no crow, and won't be called a liar." Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand.

The Magnar of Thenn studied Jon with his chilly grey eyes. "We shall learn their numbers soon enough," he said after a moment. "Go. I will send for you if I have further questions."

Jon bowed his head stiffly, and went. *If all the wildlings were like Styr, it would be easier to betray them.* The Thenns were not like other free folk, though. The Magnar claimed to be the last of the First Men, and ruled with an iron hand. His little land of Thenn was a high mountain valley hidden amongst the northernmost peaks of the Frostfangs, surrounded by cave dwellers, Hornfoot men, giants, and the cannibal clans of the ice rivers. Ygritte said the Thenns were savage fighters, and that their Magnar was a god to them. Jon could believe that. Unlike Jarl and Harma and Rattleshirt, Styr commanded absolute obedience from his men, and that discipline was no doubt part of why Mance had chosen him to go over the Wall.

He walked past the Thenns, sitting atop their rounded bronze helms about their cookfires. *Where did Ygrette get herself to?* He found her gear and his together, but no sign of the girl herself. “She took a torch and went off that way,” Grigg the Goat told him, pointing toward the back of the cavern.

Jon followed his finger, and found himself in a dim back room wandering through a maze of columns and stalactites. *She can't be here*, he was thinking, when he heard her laugh. He turned toward the sound, but within ten paces he was in a dead end, facing a blank wall of rose and white flowstone. Baffled, he made his way back the way he'd come, and then he saw it: a dark hole under an outthrust of wet stone. He knelt, listened, heard the faint sound of water. “Ygritte?”

“In here,” her voice came back, echoing faintly.

Jon had to crawl a dozen paces before the cave opened up around him. When he stood again, it took his eyes a moment to adjust. Ygritte had brought a torch, but there was no other light. She stood beside a little waterfall that fell from a cleft in the rock down into a wide dark pool. The orange and yellow flames shone against the pale green water.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her.

“I heard water. I wanted t'see how deep the cave went.” She pointed with the torch. “There's a passage goes down further. I followed it a hundred paces before I turned back.”

“A dead end?”

“You know nothing, Jon Snow. It went on and on and on. There are hundreds o' caves in these hills, and down deep they all connect. There's even a way under your Wall. Gorne's Way.”

“Gorne,” said Jon. “Gorne was King-beyond-the-Wall.”

“Aye,” said Ygritte. “Together with his brother Gendel, three thousand years ago. They led a host o' free folk through the caves, and the Watch was none the wiser. But when they come out, the wolves o' Winterfell fell upon them.”

“There was a battle,” Jon recalled. “Gorne slew the King in the North, but his son picked up his banner and took the crown from his head, and cut down Gorne in turn.”

“And the sound o’ swords woke the crows in their castles, and they rode out all in black to take the free folk in the rear.”

“Yes. Gendel had the king to the south, the Umbers to the east, and the Watch to the north of him. He died as well.”

“You know nothing, Jon Snow. Gendel did not die. He cut his way free, *through* the crows, and led his people back north with the wolves howling at their heels. Only Gendel did not know the caves as Gorne had, and took a wrong turn.” She swept the torch back and forth, so the shadows jumped and moved. “Deeper he went, and deeper, and when he tried t’ turn back the ways that seemed familiar ended in stone rather than sky. Soon his torches began t’ fail, one by one, till finally there was naught but dark. Gendel’s folk were never seen again, but on a still night you can hear their children’s children’s children sobbing under the hills, still looking for the way back up. Listen? Do you hear them?”

All Jon could hear was the falling water and the faint crackle of flames. “This way under the Wall was lost as well?”

“Some have searched for it. Them that go too deep find Gendel’s children, and Gendel’s children are always hungry.” Smiling, she set the torch carefully in a notch of rock, and came toward him. “There’s naught to eat in the dark but flesh,” she whispered, biting at his neck.

Jon nuzzled her hair and filled his nose with the smell of her. “You sound like Old Nan, telling Bran a monster story.”

Ygritte punched his shoulder. “An old woman, am I?”

“You’re older than me.”

“Aye, and wiser. You know nothing, Jon Snow.” She pushed away from him, and shrugged out of her rabbitskin vest.

“What are you doing?”

“Showing you how old I am.” She unlaced her doeskin shirt, tossed it aside, pulled her three woolen undershirts up over her head all at once. “I want you should see me.”

“We shouldn’t—”

“We *should*.” Her breasts bounced as she stood on one leg to pull one boot, then hopped onto her other foot to attend to the other. Her nipples

were wide pink circles. “You as well,” Ygritte said as she yanked down her sheepskin breeches. “If you want to look you have to show. You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

“I know I want you,” he heard himself say, all his vows and all his honor forgotten. She stood before him naked as her name day, and he was as hard as the rock around them. He had been in her half a hundred times by now, but always beneath the furs, with others all around them. He had never seen how beautiful she was. Her legs were skinny but well muscled, the hair at the juncture of her thighs a brighter red than that on her head. *Does that make it even luckier?* He pulled her close. “I love the smell of you,” he said. “I love your red hair. I love your mouth, and the way you kiss me. I love your smile. I love your teats.” He kissed them, one and then the other. “I love your skinny legs, and what’s between them.” He knelt to kiss her there, lightly on her mound at first, but Ygritte moved her legs apart a little, and he saw the pink inside and kissed that as well, and tasted her. She gave a little gasp. “If you love me all so much, why are you still dressed?” she whispered. “You know nothing, Jon Snow. *Noth—oh. Oh. OHHH.*”

Afterward, she was almost shy, or as shy as Ygritte ever got. “That thing you did,” she said, when they lay together on their piled clothes. “With your . . . mouth.” She hesitated. “Is that . . . is it what lords do to their ladies, down in the south?”

“I don’t think so.” No one had ever told Jon just what lords did with their ladies. “I only . . . wanted to kiss you there, that’s all. You seemed to like it.”

“Aye. I . . . I liked it some. No one taught you such?”

“There’s been no one,” he confessed. “Only you.”

“A maid,” she teased. “You were a maid.”

He gave her closest nipple a playful pinch. “I was a man of the Night’s Watch.” *Was*, he heard himself say. What was he now? He did not want to look at that. “Were you a maid?”

Ygritte pushed herself onto an elbow. “I am nineteen, and a spearwife, and kissed by fire. How could I be maiden?”

“Who was he?”

“A boy at a feast, five years past. He’d come trading with his brothers, and he had hair like mine, kissed by fire, so I thought he would be lucky. But he was weak. When he came back t’ try and steal me, Longspear broke his arm and ran him off, and he never tried again, not once.”

“It wasn’t Longspear, then?” Jon was relieved. He liked Longspear, with his homely face and friendly ways.

She punched him. “That’s vile. Would you bed your sister?”

“Longspear’s not your brother.”

“He’s of my village. You know nothing, Jon Snow. A true man steals a woman from afar, t’ strengthen the clan. Women who bed brothers or fathers or clan kin offend the gods, and are cursed with weak and sickly children. Even monsters.”

“Craster weds his daughters,” Jon pointed out.

She punched him again. “Craster’s more your kind than ours. His father was a crow who stole a woman out of Whitetree village, but after he had her he flew back t’ his Wall. She went t’ Castle Black once t’ show the crow his son, but the brothers blew their horns and run her off. Craster’s blood is black, and he bears a heavy curse.” She ran her fingers lightly across his stomach. “I feared you’d do the same once. Fly back to the Wall. You never knew what t’ do after you stole me.”

Jon sat up. “Ygritte, I never stole you.”

“Aye, you did. You jumped down the mountain and killed Orell, and afore I could get my axe you had a knife at my throat. I thought you’d have me then, or kill me, or maybe both, but you never did. And when I told you the tale o’ Bael the Bard and how he plucked the rose o’ Winterfell, I thought you’d know to pluck me then for certain, but you didn’t. You know *nothing*, Jon Snow.” She gave him a shy smile. “You might be learning some, though.”

The light was shifting all about her, Jon noticed suddenly. He looked around. “We had best go up. The torch is almost done.”

“Is the crow afeared o’ Gendel’s children?” she said, with a grin. “It’s only a little way up, and I’m not done with you, Jon Snow.” She pushed

him back down on the clothes and straddled him. “Would you . . .” She hesitated.

“What?” he prompted, as the torch began to gutter.

“Do it again?” Ygritte blurted. “With your mouth? The lord’s kiss? And I . . . I could see if you liked it any.”

By the time the torch burned out, Jon Snow no longer cared.

His guilt came back afterward, but weaker than before. *If this is so wrong*, he wondered, *why did the gods make it feel so good?*

The grotto was pitch-dark by the time they finished. The only light was the dim glow of the passage back up to the larger cavern, where a score of fires burned. They were soon fumbling and bumping into each other as they tried to dress in the dark. Ygritte stumbled into the pool and screeched at the cold of the water. When Jon laughed, she pulled him in too. They wrestled and splashed in the dark, and then she was in his arms again, and it turned out they were not finished after all.

“Jon Snow,” she told him, when he’d spent his seed inside her, “don’t move now, sweet. I like the feel of you in there, I do. Let’s not go back t’ Styr and Jarl. Let’s go down inside, and join up with Gendel’s children. I don’t ever want t’ leave this cave, Jon Snow. Not ever.”