

## JON

The call came drifting through the black of night. Jon pushed himself onto an elbow, his hand reaching for Longclaw by force of habit as the camp began to stir. *The horn that wakes the sleepers*, he thought.

The long low note lingered at the edge of hearing. The sentries at the ringwall stood still in their footsteps, breath frosting and heads turned toward the west. As the sound of the horn faded, even the wind ceased to blow. Men rolled from their blankets and reached for spears and swordbelts, moving quietly, listening. A horse whickered and was hushed. For a heartbeat it seemed as if the whole forest were holding its breath. The brothers of the Night's Watch waited for a second blast, praying they should not hear it, fearing that they would.

When the silence had stretched unbearably long and the men knew at last that the horn would not wind again, they grinned at one another sheepishly, as if to deny that they had been anxious. Jon Snow fed a few sticks to the fire, buckled on his swordbelt, pulled on his boots, shook the dirt and dew from the cloak, and fastened it around his shoulders. The flames blazed up beside him, welcome heat beating against his face as he dressed. He could hear the Lord Commander moving inside the tent. After a moment Mormont lifted the flap. "One blast?" On his shoulder, his raven sat fluffed and silent, looking miserable.

"One, my lord," Jon agreed. "Brothers returning."

Mormont moved to the fire. "The Halfhand. And past time." He had grown more restive every day they waited; much longer and he would have been fit to whelp cubs. "See that there's hot food for the men and fodder for the horses. I'll see Qhorin at once."

"I'll bring him, my lord." The men from the Shadow Tower had been expected days ago. When they had not appeared, the brothers had begun to wonder. Jon had heard gloomy mutterings around the cookfire, and not just from Dolorous Edd. Ser Ottyn Wythers was for retreating to Castle Black as

soon as possible. Ser Mallador Locke would strike for the Shadow Tower, hoping to pick up Qhorin's trail and learn what had befallen him. And Thoren Smallwood wanted to push on into the mountains. "Mance Rayder knows he must battle the Watch," Thoren had declared, "but he will never look for us so far north. If we ride up the Milkwater, we can take him unawares and cut his host to ribbons before he knows we are on him."

"The numbers would be greatly against us," Ser Ottyn had objected. "Craster said he was gathering a great host. Many thousands. Without Qhorin, we are only two hundred."

"Send two hundred wolves against ten thousand sheep, ser, and see what happens," said Smallwood confidently.

"There are goats among these sheep, Thoren," warned Jarman Buckwell. "Aye, and maybe a few lions. Rattleshirt, Harma the Dogshead, Alfyn Crowkiller..."

"I know them as well as you do, Buckwell," Thoren Smallwood snapped back. "And I mean to have their heads, every one. These are *wildlings*. No soldiers. A few hundred heroes, drunk most like, amidst a great horde of women, children, and thralls. We will sweep over them and send them howling back to their hovels."

They had argued for many hours, and reached no agreement. The Old Bear was too stubborn to retreat, but neither would he rush headlong up the Milkwater, seeking battle. In the end, nothing had been decided but to wait a few more days for the men from the Shadow Tower, and talk again if they did not appear.

And now they had, which meant that the decision could be delayed no longer. Jon was glad of that much, at least. If they must battle Mance Rayder, let it be soon.

He found Dolorous Edd at the fire, complaining about how difficult it was for him to sleep when people insisted on blowing horns in the woods. Jon gave him something new to complain about. Together they woke Hake, who received the Lord Commander's orders with a stream of curses, but got up all the same and soon had a dozen brothers cutting roots for a soup.

Sam came puffing up as Jon crossed the camp. Under the black hood his face was as pale and round as the moon. “I heard the horn. Has your uncle come back?”

“It’s only the men from the Shadow Tower.” It was growing harder to cling to the hope of Benjen Stark’s safe return. The cloak he had found beneath the Fist could well have belonged to his uncle or one of his men, even the Old Bear admitted as much, though why they would have buried it there, wrapped around the cache of dragonglass, no one could say. “Sam, I have to go.”

At the ringwall, he found the guards sliding spikes from the half-frozen earth to make an opening. It was not long until the first of the brothers from the Shadow Tower began wending their way up the slope. All in leather and fur they were, with here and there a bit of steel or bronze; heavy beards covered hard lean faces, and made them look as shaggy as their garrons. Jon was surprised to see some of them were riding two to a horse. When he looked more closely, it was plain that many of them were wounded. *There has been trouble on the way.*

Jon knew Qhorin Halfhand the instant he saw him, though they had never met. The big ranger was half a legend in the Watch; a man of slow words and swift action, tall and straight as a spear, long-limbed and solemn. Unlike his men, he was clean-shaven. His hair fell from beneath his helm in a heavy braid touched with hoarfrost, and the blacks he wore were so faded they might have been greys. Only thumb and forefinger remained on the hand that held the reins; the other fingers had been sheared off catching a wildling’s axe that would otherwise have split his skull. It was told that he had thrust his maimed fist into the face of the axeman so the blood spurted into his eyes, and slew him while he was blind. Since that day, the wildlings beyond the Wall had known no foe more implacable.

Jon hailed him. “Lord Commander Mormont would see you at once. I’ll show you to his tent.”

Qhorin swung down from his saddle. “My men are hungry, and our horses require tending.”

“They’ll all be seen to.”

The ranger gave his horse into the care of one of his men and followed. "You are Jon Snow. You have your father's look."

"Did you know him, my lord?"

"I am no lordling. Only a brother of the Night's Watch. I knew Lord Eddard, yes. And his father before him."

Jon had to hurry his steps to keep up with Qhorin's long strides. "Lord Rickard died before I was born."

"He was a friend to the Watch." Qhorin glanced behind. "It is said that a direwolf runs with you."

"Ghost should be back by dawn. He hunts at night."

They found Dolorous Edd frying a rasher of bacon and boiling a dozen eggs in a kettle over the Old Bear's cookfire. Mormont sat in his wood-and-leather camp chair. "I had begun to fear for you. Did you meet with trouble?"

"We met with Alfyn Crowkiller. Mance had sent him to scout along the Wall, and we chanced on him returning." Qhorin removed his helm. "Alfyn will trouble the realm no longer, but some of his company escaped us. We hunted down as many as we could, but it may be that a few will win back to the mountains."

"And the cost?"

"Four brothers dead. A dozen wounded. A third as many as the foe. And we took captives. One died quickly from his wounds, but the other lived long enough to be questioned."

"Best talk of this inside. Jon will fetch you a horn of ale. Or would you prefer hot spiced wine?"

"Boiled water will suffice. An egg and a bite of bacon."

"As you wish." Mormont lifted the flap of the tent and Qhorin Halfhand stooped and stepped through.

Edd stood over the kettle swishing the eggs about with a spoon. "I envy those eggs," he said. "I could do with a bit of boiling about now. If the kettle were larger, I might jump in. Though I would sooner it were wine

than water. There are worse ways to die than warm and drunk. I knew a brother drowned himself in wine once. It was a poor vintage, though, and his corpse did not improve it.”

“You *drank* the wine?”

“It’s an awful thing to find a brother dead. You’d have need of a drink as well, Lord Snow.” Edd stirred the kettle and added a pinch more nutmeg.

Restless, Jon squatted by the fire and poked at it with a stick. He could hear the Old Bear’s voice inside the tent, punctuated by the raven’s squawks and Qhorin Halfhand’s quieter tones, but he could not make out the words. *Alfyn Crowkiller dead, that’s good.* He was one of the bloodiest of the wildling raiders, taking his name from the black brothers he’d slain. *So why does Qhorin sound so grave, after such a victory?*

Jon had hoped that the arrival of men from the Shadow Tower would lift the spirits in the camp. Only last night, he was coming back through the dark from a piss when he heard five or six men talking in low voices around the embers of a fire. When he heard Chett muttering that it was past time they turned back, Jon stopped to listen. “It’s an old man’s folly, this ranging,” he heard. “We’ll find nothing but our graves in them mountains.”

“There’s giants in the Frostfangs, and wargs, and worse things,” said Lark the Sisterman.

“I’ll not be going there, I promise you.”

“The Old Bear’s not like to give you a choice.”

“Might be we won’t give him one,” said Chett.

Just then one of the dogs had raised his head and growled, and he had to move away quickly, before he was seen. *I was not meant to hear that*, he thought. He considered taking the tale to Mormont, but he could not bring himself to inform on his brothers, even brothers such as Chett and the Sisterman. *It was just empty talk*, he told himself. *They are cold and afraid, we all are.* It was hard waiting here, perched on the stony summit above the forest, wondering what the morrow might bring. *The unseen enemy is always the most fearsome.*

Jon slid his new dagger from its sheath and studied the flames as they played against the shiny black glass. He had fashioned the wooden hilt himself, and wound hempen twine around it to make a grip. Ugly, but it served. Dolorous Edd opined that glass knives were about as useful as nipples on a knight's breastplate, but Jon was not so certain. The dragonglass blade was sharper than steel, albeit far more brittle.

*It must have been buried for a reason.*

He had made a dagger for Grenn as well, and another for the Lord Commander. The warhorn he had given to Sam. On closer examination the horn had proved cracked, and even after he had cleaned all the dirt out, Jon had been unable to get any sound from it. The rim was chipped as well, but Sam liked old things, even worthless old things. "Make a drinking horn out of it," Jon told him, "and every time you take a drink you'll remember how you ranged beyond the Wall, all the way to the Fist of the First Men." He gave Sam a spearhead and a dozen arrowheads as well, and passed the rest out among his other friends for luck.

The Old Bear had seemed pleased by the dagger, but he preferred a steel knife at his belt, Jon had noticed. Mormont could offer no answers as to who might have buried the cloak or what it might mean. *Perhaps Qhorin will know.* The Halfhand had ventured deeper into the wild than any other living man.

"You want to serve, or shall I?"

Jon sheathed the dagger. "I'll do it." He wanted to hear what they were saying.

Edd cut three thick slices off a stale round of oat bread, stacked them on a wooden platter, covered them with bacon and bacon drippings, and filled a bowl with hard-cooked eggs. Jon took the bowl in one hand and the platter in the other and backed into the Lord Commander's tent.

Qhorin was seated cross-legged on the floor, his spine as straight as a spear. Candlelight flickered against the hard flat planes of his cheeks as he spoke. "...Rattleshirt, the Weeping Man, and every other chief great and small," he was saying. "They have wargs as well, and mammoths, and more strength than we would have dreamed. Or so he claimed. I will not swear as

to the truth of it. Ebben believes the man was telling us tales to make his life last a little longer.”

“True or false, the Wall must be warned,” the Old Bear said as Jon placed the platter between them. “And the king.”

“Which king?”

“All of them. The true and the false alike. If they would claim the realm, let them defend it.”

The Halfhand helped himself to an egg and cracked it on the edge of the bowl. “These kings will do what they will,” he said, peeling away the shell. “Likely it will be little enough. The best hope is Winterfell. The Starks must rally the north.”

“Yes. To be sure.” The Old Bear unrolled a map, frowned at it, tossed it aside, opened another. He was pondering where the hammer would fall, Jon could see it. The Watch had once manned seventeen castles along the hundred leagues of the Wall, but they had been abandoned one by one as the brotherhood dwindled. Only three were now garrisoned, a fact that Mance Rayder knew as well as they did. “Ser Alliser Thorne will bring back fresh levies from King’s Landing, we can hope. If we man Greyguard from the Shadow Tower and the Long Barrow from Eastwatch...”

“Greyguard has largely collapsed. Stonedoor would serve better, if the men could be found. Icemark and Deep Lake as well, mayhaps. With daily patrols along the battlements between.”

“Patrols, aye. Twice a day, if we can. The Wall itself is a formidable obstacle. undefended, it cannot stop them, yet it will delay them. The larger the host, the longer they’ll require. From the emptiness they’ve left behind, they must mean to bring their women with them. Their young as well, and beasts... have you ever seen a goat climb a ladder? A rope? They will need to build a stair, or a great ramp... it will take a moon’s turn at the least, perhaps longer. Mance will know his best chance is to pass *beneath* the Wall. Through a gate, or...”

“A breach.”

Mormont’s head came up sharply. “What?”

“They do not plan to climb the Wall nor to burrow beneath it, my lord. They plan to break it.”

“The Wall is seven hundred feet high, and so thick at the base that it would take a hundred men a year to cut through it with picks and axes.”

“Even so.”

Mormont plucked at his beard, frowning. “How?”

“How else? Sorcery.” Qhorin bit the egg in half. “Why else would Mance choose to gather his strength in the Frostfangs? Bleak and hard they are, and a long weary march from the Wall.”

“I’d hoped he chose the mountains to hide his muster from the eyes of my rangers.”

“Perhaps,” said Qhorin, finishing the egg, “but there is more, I think. He is seeking something in the high cold places. He is searching for something he needs.”

“Something?” Mormont’s raven lifted its head and screamed. The sound was sharp as a knife in the closeness of the tent.

“Some power. What it is, our captive could not say. He was questioned perhaps too sharply, and died with much unsaid. I doubt he knew in any case.”

Jon could hear the wind outside. It made a high thin sound as it shivered through the stones of the ringwall and tugged at the tent ropes. Mormont rubbed his mouth thoughtfully. “Some power,” he repeated. “I must know.”

“Then you must send scouts into the mountains.”

“I am loath to risk more men.”

“We can only die. Why else do we don these black cloaks, but to die in defense of the realm? I would send fifteen men, in three parties of five. One to probe the Milkwater, one the Skirling Pass, one to climb the Giant’s Stair. Jarman Buckwell, Thoren Smallwood, and myself to command. To learn what waits in those mountains.”

“*Waits*,” the raven cried. “*Waits*.”



Lord Commander Mormont sighed deep in his chest. “I see no other choice,” he conceded, “but if you do not return...”

“Someone will come down out of the Frostfangs, my lord,” the ranger said. “If us, all well and good. If not, it will be Mance Rayder, and you sit square in his path. He cannot march south and leave you behind, to follow and harry his rear. He must attack. This is a strong place.”

“Not that strong,” said Mormont.

“Belike we shall all die, then. Our dying will buy time for our brothers on the Wall. Time to garrison the empty castles and freeze shut the gates, time to summon lords and kings to their aid, time to hone their axes and repair their catapults. Our lives will be coin well spent.”

“*Die*,” the raven muttered, pacing along Mormont’s shoulders. “*Die, die, die, die*.” The old Bear sat slumped and silent, as if the burden of speech had grown too heavy for him to bear. But at last he said, “May the gods forgive me. Choose your men.”

Qhorin Halfhand turned his head. His eyes met Jon’s, and held them for a long moment. “Very well. I choose Jon Snow.”

Mormont blinked. “He is hardly more than a boy. And my steward besides. Not even a ranger.”

“Tollett can care for you as well, my lord.” Qhorin lifted his maimed, two-fingered hand. “The old gods are still strong beyond the Wall. The gods of the First Men... and the Starks.”

Mormont looked at Jon. “What is your will in this?”

“To go,” he said at once.

The old man smiled sadly. “I thought it might be.”

Dawn had broken when Jon stepped from the tent beside Qhorin Halfhand. The wind swirled around them, stirring their black cloaks and sending a scatter of red cinders flying from the fire.

“We ride at noon,” the ranger told him. “Best find that wolf of yours.”