



JON

The mare was blown, but Jon could not let up on her. He had to reach the Wall before the Magnar. He would have slept in the saddle if he'd had one; lacking that, it was hard enough to stay a horse while awake. His wounded leg grew ever more painful. He dare not rest long enough to let it heal. Instead he ripped it open anew each time he mounted up.

When he crested a rise and saw the brown rutted kingsroad before him wending its way north through hill and plain, he patted the mare's neck and said, "Now all we need do is follow the road, girl. Soon the Wall." His leg had gone as stiff as wood by then, and fever had made him so light-headed that twice he found himself riding in the wrong direction.

Soon the Wall. He pictured his friends drinking mulled wine in the common hall. Hobb would be with his kettles, Donal Noye at his forge, Maester Aemon in his rooms beneath the rookery. *And the Old Bear? Sam, Grenn, Dolorous Edd, Dywen with his wooden teeth . . .* Jon could only pray that some had escaped the Fist.

Ygritte was much in his thoughts as well. He remembered the smell of her hair, the warmth of her body . . . and the look on her face as she slit the old man's throat. *You were wrong to love her*, a voice whispered. *You were wrong to leave her*, a different voice insisted. He wondered if his father had been torn the same way, when he'd left Jon's mother to return to Lady

Catelyn. *He was pledged to Lady Stark, and I am pledged to the Night's Watch.*

He almost rode through Mole's Town, so feverish that he did not know where he was. Most of the village was hidden underground, only a handful of small hovels to be seen by the light of the waning moon. The brothel was a shed no bigger than a privy, its red lantern creaking in the wind, a bloodshot eye peering through the blackness. Jon dismounted at the adjoining stable, half-stumbling from the mare's back as he shouted two boys awake. "I need a fresh mount, with saddle and bridle," he told them, in a tone that brooked no argument. They brought him that; a skin of wine as well, and half a loaf of brown bread. "Wake the village," he told them. "Warn them. There are wildlings south of the Wall. Gather your goods and make for Castle Black." He pulled himself onto the black gelding they'd given him, gritting his teeth at the pain in his leg, and rode hard for the north.

As the stars began to fade in the eastern sky, the Wall appeared before him, rising above the trees and the morning mists. Moonlight glimmered pale against the ice. He urged the gelding on, following the muddy slick road until he saw the stone towers and timbered halls of Castle Black huddled like broken toys beneath the great cliff of ice. By then the Wall glowed pink and purple with the first light of dawn.

No sentries challenged him as he rode past the outbuildings. No one came forth to bar his way. Castle Black seemed as much a ruin as Greyguard. Brown brittle weeds grew between cracks in the stones of the courtyards. Old snow covered the roof of the Flint Barracks and lay in drifts against the north side of Hardin's Tower, where Jon used to sleep before being made the Old Bear's steward. Fingers of soot streaked the Lord Commander's Tower where the smoke had boiled from the windows. Mormont had moved to the King's Tower after the fire, but Jon saw no lights there either. From the ground he could not tell if there were sentries walking the Wall seven hundred feet above, but he saw no one on the huge switchback stair that climbed the south face of the ice like some great wooden thunderbolt.

There was smoke rising from the chimney of the armory, though; only a wisp, almost invisible against the grey northern sky, but it was enough. Jon

dismounted and limped toward it. Warmth poured out the open door like the hot breath of summer. Within, one-armed Donal Noye was working his bellows at the fire. He looked up at the noise. “Jon Snow?”

“None else.” Despite fever, exhaustion, his leg, the Magnar, the old man, Ygritte, Mance, despite it all, Jon smiled. It was good to be back, good to see Noye with his big belly and pinned-up sleeve, his jaw bristling with black stubble.

The smith released his grip on the bellows. “Your face . . .”

He had almost forgotten about his face. “A skinchanger tried to rip out my eye.”

Noye frowned. “Scarred or smooth, it’s a face I thought I’d seen the last of. We heard you’d gone over to Mance Raydar.”

Jon grasped the door to stay upright. “Who told you that?”

“Jarman Buckwell. He returned a fortnight past. His scouts claim they saw you with their own eyes, riding along beside the wildling column and wearing a sheepskin cloak.” Noye eyed him. “I see the last part’s true.”

“It’s all true,” Jon confessed. “As far as it goes.”

“Should I be pulling down a sword to gut you, then?”

“No. I was acting on orders. Qhorin Halfhand’s last command. Noye, where is the garrison?”

“Defending the Wall against your wildling friends.”

“Yes, but *where*?”

“Everywhere. Harma Dogshead was seen at Woodswatch-by-the-Pool, Rattleshirt at Long Barrow, the Weeper near Icemark. All along the Wall . . . they’re here, they’re there, they’re climbing near Queensgate, they’re hacking at the gates of Greyguard, they’re massing against Eastwatch . . . but one glimpse of a black cloak and they’re gone. Next day they’re somewhere else.”

Jon swallowed a groan. “Feints. Mance wants us to spread ourselves thin, don’t you see?” *And Bowen Marsh has obliged him.* “The gate is here. The attack is here.”

Noye crossed the room. “Your leg is drenched in blood.”

Jon looked down dully. It was true. His wound had opened again. “An arrow wound . . .”

“A wildling arrow.” It was not a question. Noye had only one arm, but that was thick with muscle. He slid it under Jon’s to help support him. “You’re white as milk, and burning hot besides. I’m taking you to Aemon.”

“There’s no time. There are wildlings *south* of the Wall, coming up from Queenscrown to open the gate.”

“How many?” Noye half-carried Jon out the door.

“A hundred and twenty, and well armed for wildlings. Bronze armor, some bits of steel. How many men are left here?”

“Forty odd,” said Donal Noye. “The crippled and infirm, and some green boys still in training.”

“If Marsh is gone, who did he name as castellan?”

The armorer laughed. “Ser Wynton, gods preserve him. Last knight in the castle and all. The thing is, Stout seems to have forgotten and no one’s been rushing to remind him. I suppose I’m as much a commander as we have now. The meanest of the cripples.”

That was for the good, at least. The one-armed armorer was hard headed, tough, and well seasoned in war. Ser Wynton Stout, on the other hand . . . well, he had been a good man once, everyone agreed, but he had been eighty years a ranger, and both strength and wits were gone. Once he’d fallen asleep at supper and almost drowned in a bowl of pea soup.

“Where’s your wolf?” Noye asked as they crossed the yard.

“Ghost. I had to leave him when I climbed the Wall. I’d hoped he’d make his way back here.”

“I’m sorry, lad. There’s been no sign of him.” They limped up to the maester’s door, in the long wooden keep beneath the rookery. The armorer gave it a kick. “*Clydas!*”

After a moment a stooped, round-shouldered little man in black peered out. His small pink eyes widened at the sight of Jon. “Lay the lad down, I’ll fetch the maester.”

A fire was burning in the hearth, and the room was almost stuffy. The warmth made Jon sleepy. As soon as Noye eased him down onto his back, he closed his eyes to stop the world from spinning. He could hear the ravens *quorking* and complaining in the rookery above. “*Snow*,” one bird was saying. “*Snow, snow, snow*.” That was Sam’s doing, Jon remembered. Had Samwell Tarly made it home safely, he wondered, or only the birds?

Maester Aemon was not long in coming. He moved slowly, one spotted hand on Clydas’s arm as he shuffled forward with small careful steps. Around his thin neck his chain hung heavy, gold and silver links glinting amongst iron, lead, tin, and other base metals. “Jon Snow,” he said, “you must tell me all you’ve seen and done when you are stronger. Donal, put a kettle of wine on the fire, and my irons as well. I will want them red-hot. Clydas, I shall need that good sharp knife of yours.” The maester was more than a hundred years old; shrunken, frail, hairless, and quite blind. But if his milky eyes saw nothing, his wits were still as sharp as they had ever been.

“There are wildlings coming,” Jon told him, as Clydas ran a blade up the leg of his breeches, slicing the heavy black cloth, crusty with old blood and sodden with new. “From the south. We climbed the Wall . . .”

Maester Aemon gave Jon’s crude bandage a sniff when Clydas cut it away. “We?”

“I was with them. Qhorin Halfhand commanded me to join them.” Jon winced as the maester’s finger explored his wound, poking and prodding. “The Magnar of Thenn—*aaaaah*, that hurts.” He clenched his teeth. “Where is the Old Bear?”

“Jon . . . it grieves me to say, but Lord Commander Mormont was murdered at Craster’s Keep, at the hands of his Sworn Brothers.”

“Bro . . . *our own men*?” Aemon’s words hurt a hundred times worse than his fingers. Jon remembered the Old Bear as last he’d seen him, standing before his tent with his raven on his arm croaking for corn. *Mormont gone*? He had feared it ever since he’d seen the aftermath of battle on the Fist, yet it was no less a blow. “Who was it? Who turned on him?”

“Garth of Oldtown, Ollo Lophand, Dirk . . . thieves, cowards and killers, the lot of them. We should have seen it coming. The Watch is not what it was. Too few honest men to keep the rogues in line.” Donal Noye turned

the maester's blades in the fire. "A dozen true men made it back. Dolorous Edd, Giant, your friend the Aurochs. We had the tale from them."

Only a dozen? Two hundred men had left Castle Black with Lord Commander Mormont, two hundred of the Watch's best. "Does this mean Marsh is Lord Commander, then?" The Old Pomegranate was amiable, and a diligent First Steward, but he was woefully ill-suited to face a wildling host.

"For the nonce, until we can hold a choosing," said Maester Aemon. "Clydas, bring me the flask."

A choosing. With Qhorin Halfhand and Ser Jaremy Rykker both dead and Ben Stark still missing, who was there? Not Bowen Marsh or Ser Wynton Stout, that was certain. Had Thoren Smallwood survived the Fist, or Ser Ottyn Wythers? *No, it will be Cotter Pyke or Ser Denys Mallister. Which, though?* The commanders at the Shadow Tower and Eastwatch were good men, but very different; Ser Denys courtly and cautious, as chivalrous as he was elderly, Pyke younger, bastard-born, rough-tongued, and bold to a fault. Worse, the two men despised each other. The Old Bear had always kept them far apart, at opposite ends of the Wall. The Mallisters had a bone-deep mistrust of the ironborn, Jon knew.

A stab of pain reminded him of his own woes. The maester squeezed his hand. "Clydas is bringing milk of the poppy."

Jon tried to rise. "I don't need—"

"You do," Aemon said firmly. "This will hurt."

Donal Noye crossed the room and shoved Jon back onto his back. "Be still, or I'll tie you down." Even with only one arm, the smith handled him as if he were a child. Clydas returned with a green flask and a rounded stone cup. Maester Aemon poured it full. "Drink this."

Jon had bitten his lip in his struggles. He could taste blood mingled with the thick, chalky potion. It was all he could do not to retch it back up.

Clydas brought a basin of warm water, and Maester Aemon washed the pus and blood from his wound. Gentle as he was, even the lightest touch made Jon want to scream. "The Magnar's men are disciplined, and they have bronze armor," he told them. Talking helped keep his mind off his leg.

“The Magnar’s a lord on Skagos,” Noye said. “There were Skagossons at Eastwatch when I first came to the Wall, I remember hearing them talk of him.”

“Jon was using the word in its older sense, I think,” Maester Aemon said, “not as a family name but as a title. It derives from the Old Tongue.”

“It means lord,” Jon agreed. “Styr is the Magnar of some place called Thenn, in the far north of the Frostfangs. He has a hundred of his own men, and a score of raiders who know the Gift almost as well as we do. Mance never found the horn, though, that’s something. The Horn of Winter, that’s what he was digging for up along the Milkwater.”

Maester Aemon paused, washcloth in hand. “The Horn of Winter is an ancient legend. Does the King-beyond-the-Wall truly believe that such a thing exists?”

“They all do,” said Jon. “Ygritte said they opened a hundred graves . . . graves of kings and heroes, all over the valley of the Milkwater, but they never . . .”

“Who is *Ygritte*?” Donal Noye asked pointedly.

“A woman of the free folk.” How could he explain Ygritte to them? *She’s warm and smart and funny and she can kiss a man or slit his throat.* “She’s with Styr, but she’s not . . . she’s young, only a girl, in truth, wild, but she . . .” *She killed an old man for building a fire.* His tongue felt thick and clumsy. The milk of the poppy was clouding his wits. “I broke my vows with her. I never meant to, but . . .” *It was wrong. Wrong to love her, wrong to leave her . . .* “I wasn’t strong enough. The Halfhand commanded me, ride with them, watch, I must not balk, I . . .” His head felt as if it were packed with wet wool.

Maester Aemon sniffed Jon’s wound again. Then he put the bloody cloth back in the basin and said, “Donal, the hot knife, if you please. I shall need you to hold him still.”

I will not scream, Jon told himself when he saw the blade glowing red hot. But he broke that vow as well. Donal Noye held him down, while Clydas helped guide the maester’s hand. Jon did not move, except to pound his fist against the table, again and again and again. The pain was so huge he felt small and weak and helpless inside it, a child whimpering in the

dark. *Ygritte*, he thought, when the stench of burning flesh was in his nose and his own shriek echoing in her ears. *Ygritte, I had to*. For half a heartbeat the agony started to ebb. But then the iron touched him once again, and he fainted.

When his eyelids fluttered open, he was wrapped in thick wool and floating. He could not seem to move, but that did not matter. For a time he dreamed that Ygritte was with him, tending him with gentle hands. Finally he closed his eyes and slept.

The next waking was not so gentle. The room was dark, but under the blankets the pain was back, a throbbing in his leg that turned into a hot knife at the least motion. Jon learned that the hard way when he tried to see if he still had a leg. Gasping, he swallowed a scream and made another fist.

“Jon?” A candle appeared, and a well-remembered face was looking down on him, big ears and all. “You shouldn’t move.”

“Pyp?” Jon reached up, and the other boy clasped his hand and gave it a squeeze. “I thought you’d gone . . .”

“. . . with the Old Pomegranate? No, he thinks I’m too small and green. Grenn’s here too.”

“I’m here too.” Grenn stepped to the other side of the bed. “I fell asleep.”

Jon’s throat was dry. “Water,” he gasped. Grenn brought it, and held it to his lips. “I saw the Fist,” he said, after a long swallow. “The blood, and the dead horses . . . Noye said a dozen made it back . . . who?”

“Dywen did. Giant, Dolorous Edd, Sweet Donnel Hill, Ulmer, Left Hand Lew, Garth Greyfeather. Four or five more. Me.”

“Sam?”

Grenn looked away. “He killed one of the Others, Jon. I saw it. He stabbed him with that dragonglass knife you made him, and we started calling him Sam the Slayer. He hated that.”

Sam the Slayer. Jon could hardly imagine a less likely warrior than Sam Tarly. “What happened to him?”

“We left him.” Grenn sounded miserable. “I shook him and screamed at him, even slapped his face. Giant tried to drag him to his feet, but he was too heavy. Remember in training how he’d curl up on the ground and lie

there whimpering? At Craster's he wouldn't even whimper. Dirk and Ollo were tearing up the walls looking for food, Garth and Garth were fighting, some of the others were raping Craster's wives. Dolorous Edd figured Dirk's bunch would kill all the loyal men to keep us from telling what they'd done, and they had us two to one. We left Sam with the Old Bear. He wouldn't *move*, Jon."

You were his brother, he almost said. *How could you leave him amongst wildlings and murderers?*

"He might still be alive," said Pyp. "He might surprise us all and come riding up tomorrow."

"With Mance Rayder's head, aye." Grenn was trying to sound cheerful, Jon could tell. "Sam the Slayer!"

Jon tried to sit again. It was as much a mistake as the first time. He cried out, cursing.

"Grenn, go wake Maester Aemon," said Pyp. "Tell him Jon needs more milk of the poppy."

Yes, Jon thought. "No," he said. "The Magnar . . ."

"We know," said Pyp. "The sentries on the Wall have been told to keep one eye on the south, and Donal Noye dispatched some men to Weatherback Ridge to watch the kingsroad. Maester Aemon's sent birds to Eastwatch and the Shadow Tower too."

Maester Aemon shuffled to the bedside, one hand on Grenn's shoulder. "Jon, be gentle with yourself. It is good that you have woken, but you must give yourself time to heal. We drowned the wound with boiling wine, and closed you up with a poultice of nettle, mustard seed and moldy bread, but unless you rest . . ."

"I can't." Jon fought through the pain to sit. "Mance will be here soon . . . thousands of men, giants, mammoths . . . has word been sent to Winterfell? To the king?" Sweat dripped off his brow. He closed his eyes a moment.

Grenn gave Pyp a strange look. "He doesn't know."

"Jon," said Maester Aemon, "much and more happened while you were away, and little of it good. Balon Greyjoy has crowned himself again and sent his longships against the north. Kings sprout like weeds at every hand

and we have sent appeals to all of them, yet none will come. They have more pressing uses for their swords, and we are far off and forgotten. And Winterfell . . . Jon, be strong . . . Winterfell is no more . . .”

“No more?” Jon stared at Aemon’s white eyes and wrinkled face. “My brothers are at Winterfell. Bran and Rickon . . .”

The maester touched his brow. “I am so very sorry, Jon. Your brothers died at the command of Theon Greyjoy, after he took Winterfell in his father’s name. When your father’s bannermen threatened to retake it, he put the castle to the torch.”

“Your brothers were avenged,” Grenn said. “Bolton’s son killed all the ironmen, and it’s said he’s flaying Theon Greyjoy inch by inch for what he did.”

“I’m sorry, Jon.” Pyp squeezed his shoulder. “We are all.”

Jon had never liked Theon Greyjoy, but he had been their father’s ward. Another spasm of pain twisted up his leg, and the next he knew he was flat on his back again. “There’s some mistake,” he insisted. “At Queenscrown I saw a direwolf, a *grey* direwolf . . . grey . . . *it knew me.*” If Bran was dead, could some part of him live on in his wolf, as Orell lived within his eagle?

“Drink this.” Grenn held a cup to his lips. Jon drank. His head was full of wolves and eagles, the sound of his brothers’ laughter. The faces above him began to blur and fade. *They can’t be dead. Theon would never do that. And Winterfell . . . grey granite, oak and iron, crows wheeling around the towers, steam rising off the hot pools in the godswood, the stone kings sitting on their thrones . . . how could Winterfell be gone?*

When the dreams took him, he found himself back home once more, splashing in the hot pools beneath a huge white weirwood that had his father’s face. Ygritte was with him, laughing at him, shedding her skins till she was naked as her name day, trying to kiss him, but he couldn’t, not with his father watching. He was the blood of Winterfell, a man of the Night’s Watch. *I will not father a bastard*, he told her. *I will not. I will not.* “You know nothing, Jon Snow,” she whispered, her skin dissolving in the hot water, the flesh beneath sloughing off her bones until only skull and skeleton remained, and the pool bubbled thick and red.