

## JON

The hill jutted above the dense tangle of forest, rising solitary and sudden, its windswept heights visible from miles off. The wildlings called it the Fist of the First Men, rangers said. It *did* look like a fist, Jon Snow thought, punching up through earth and wood, its bare brown slopes knuckled with stone.

He rode to the top with Lord Mormont and the officers, leaving Ghost below under the trees. The direwolf had run off three times as they climbed, twice returning reluctantly to Jon's whistle. The third time, the Lord Commander lost patience and snapped, "Let him go, boy. I want to reach the crest before dusk. Find the wolf later."

The way up was steep and stony, the summit crowned by a chest-high wall of tumbled rocks. They had to circle some distance west before they found a gap large enough to admit the horses. "This is good ground, Thoren," the Old Bear proclaimed when at last they attained the top. "We could scarce hope for better. We'll make our camp here to await Halfhand." The Lord Commander swung down off his saddle, dislodging the raven from his shoulder. Complaining loudly, the bird took to the air.

The views atop the hill were bracing, yet it was the ringwall that drew Jon's eye, the weathered grey stones with their white patches of lichen, their beards of green moss. It was said that the Fist had been a ringfort of the First Men in the Dawn Age. "An old place, and strong," Thoren Smallwood said.

"*Old*," Mormont's raven screamed as it flapped in noisy circles about their heads. "*Old, old, old.*"

"Quiet," Mormont growled up at the bird. The Old Bear was too proud to admit to weakness, but Jon was not deceived. The strain of keeping up with younger men was taking its toll.

"These heights will be easy to defend, if need be," Thoren pointed out as he walked his horse along the ring of stones, his sable-trimmed cloak

stirring in the wind.

“Yes, this place will do.” The Old Bear lifted a hand to the wind, and raven landed on his forearm, claws scrabbling against his black ringmail.

“What about water, my lord?” Jon wondered.

“We crossed a brook at the foot of the hill.”

“A long climb for a drink,” Jon pointed out, “and outside the ring of stones.”

Thoren said, “Are you too lazy to climb a hill, boy?”

When Lord Mormont said, “We’re not like to find another place as strong. We’ll carry water, and make certain we are well supplied,” Jon knew better than to argue. So the command was given, and the brothers of the Night’s Watch raised their camp behind the stone ring the First Men had made. Black tents sprouted like mushrooms after a rain, and blankets and bedrolls covered the bare ground. Stewards tethered the garrons in long lines, and saw them fed and watered. Foresters took their axes to the trees in the waning afternoon light to harvest enough wood to see them through the night. A score of builders set to clearing brush, digging latrines, and untying their bundles of fire-hardened stakes. “I will have every opening in the ringwall ditched and staked before dark,” the Old Bear had commanded.

Once he’d put up the Lord Commander’s tent and seen to their horses, Jon Snow descended the hill in search of Ghost. The direwolf came at once, all in silence. One moment Jon was striding beneath the trees, whistling and shouting, alone in the green, pinecones and fallen leaves under his feet; the next, the great white direwolf was walking beside him, pale as morning mist.

But when they reached the ringfort, Ghost balked again. He padded forward warily to sniff at the gap in the stones, and then retreated, as if he did not like what he’d smelled. Jon tried to grab him by the scruff of his neck and haul him bodily inside the ring, no easy task; the wolf weighed as much as he did, and was stronger by far. “Ghost, what’s *wrong* with you?” It was not like him to be so unsettled. In the end Jon had to give it up. “As

you will,” he told the wolf. “Go, hunt.” The red eyes watched him as he made his way back through the mossy stones.

They ought to be safe here. The hill offered commanding views, and the slopes were precipitous to the north and west and only slightly more gentle to the east. Yet as the dusk deepened and darkness seeped into the hollows between the trees, Jon’s sense of foreboding grew. *This is the haunted forest*, he told himself. *Maybe there are ghosts here, the spirits of the First Men. This was their place, once.*

“Stop acting the boy,” he told himself. Clambering atop the piled rocks, Jon gazed off toward the setting sun. He could see the light shimmering like hammered gold off the surface of the Milkwater as it curved away to the south. Upriver the land was more rugged, the dense forest giving way to a series of bare stony hills that rose high and wild to the north and west. On the horizon stood the mountains like a great shadow, range on range of them receding into the blue-grey distance, their jagged peaks sheathed eternally in snow. Even from afar they looked vast and cold and inhospitable.

Closer at hand, it was the trees that ruled. To south and east the wood went on as far as Jon could see, a vast tangle of root and limb painted in a thousand shades of green, with here and there a patch of red where a weirwood shouldered through the pines and sentinels, or a blush of yellow where some broadleafs had begun to turn. When the wind blew, he could hear the creak and groan of branches older than he was. A thousand leaves fluttered, and for a moment the forest seemed a deep green sea, storm-tossed and heaving, eternal and unknowable.

Ghost was not like to be alone down there, he thought. Anything could be moving under that sea, creeping toward the ringfort through the dark of the wood, concealed beneath those trees. *Anything*. How would they ever know? He stood there for a long time, until the sun vanished behind the saw-toothed mountains and darkness began to creep through the forest.

“Jon?” Samwell Tarly called up. “I thought it looked like you. Are you well?”

“Well enough.” Jon hopped down. “How did you fare today?”

“Well. I fared well. Truly.”

Jon was not about to share his disquiet with his friend, not when Samwell Tarly was at last beginning to find his courage. “The Old Bear means to wait here for Qhorin Halfhand and the men from the Shadow Tower.”

“It seems a strong place,” said Sam. “A ringfort of the First Men. Do you think there were battles fought here?”

“No doubt. You’d best get a bird ready. Mormont will want to send back word.”

“I wish I could send them all. They hate being caged.”

“You would too, if you could fly.”

“If I could fly, I’d be back at Castle Black eating a pork pie,” said Sam.

Jon clapped him on the shoulder with his burned hand. They walked back through the camp together. Cookfires were being lit all around them. Overhead, the stars were coming out. The long red tail of Mormont’s Torch burned as bright as the moon. Jon heard the ravens before he saw them. Some were calling his name. The birds were not shy when it came to making noise.

*They feel it too.* “I’d best see to the Old Bear,” he said. “He gets noisy when he isn’t fed as well.”

He found Mormont talking with Thoren Smallwood and half a dozen other officers. “There you are,” the old man said gruffly. “Bring us some hot wine, if you would. The night is chilly.”

“Yes, my lord.” Jon built a cookfire, claimed a small cask of Mormont’s favorite robust red from stores, and poured it into a kettle. He hung the kettle above the flames while he gathered the rest of his ingredients. The Old Bear was particular about his hot spiced wine. So much cinnamon and so much nutmeg and so much honey, not a drop more. Raisins and nuts and dried berries, but no lemon, that was the rankest sort of southron heresy—which was queer, since he always took lemon in his morning beer. The drink must be hot to warm a man properly, the Lord

Commander insisted, but the wine must never be allowed to come to a boil. Jon kept a careful eye on the kettle.

As he worked, he could hear the voices from inside the tent. Jarman Buckwell said, “The easiest road up into the Frostfangs is to follow the Milkwater back to its source. Yet if we go that path, Rayder will know of our approach, certain as sunrise.”

“The Giant’s Stair might serve,” said Ser Mallador Locke, “or the Skirling Pass, if it’s clear.”

The wine was steaming. Jon lifted the kettle off the fire, filled eight cups, and carried them into the tent. The Old Bear was peering at the crude map Sam had drawn him that night back in Craster’s Keep. He took a cup from Jon’s tray, tried a swallow of wine, and gave a brusque nod of approval. His raven hopped down his arm. “*Corn*,” it said. “*Corn. Corn.*”

Ser Ottyn Wythers waved the wine away. “I would not go into the mountains at all,” he said in a thin, tired voice. “The Frostfangs have a cruel bite even in summer, and now... if we should be caught by a storm...”

“I do not mean to risk the Frostfangs unless I must,” said Mormont. “Wildlings can no more live on snow and stone than we can. They will emerge from the heights soon, and for a host of any size, the only route is along the Milkwater. If so, we are strongly placed here. They cannot hope to slip by us.”

“They may not wish to. They are thousands, and we will be three hundred when the Halfhand reaches us.” Ser Mallador accepted a cup from Jon.

“If it comes to battle, we could not hope for better ground than here,” declared Mormont. “We’ll strengthen the defenses. Pits and spikes, caltrops scattered on the slopes, every breach mended. Jarman, I’ll want your sharpest eyes as watchers. A ring of them, all around us and along the river, to warn of any approach. Hide them up in trees. And we had best start bringing up water too, more than we need. We’ll dig cisterns. It will keep the men occupied, and may prove needful later.”

“My rangers—” started Thoren Smallwood.

“Your rangers will limit their ranging to this side of the river until the Halfhand reaches us. After that, we’ll see. I will not lose more of my men.”

“Mance Rayder might be massing his host a day’s ride from here, and we’d never know,” Smallwood complained.

“We know where the wildlings are massing,” Mormont came back. “We had it from Craster. I mislike the man, but I do not think he lied to us in this.”

“As you say.” Smallwood took a sullen leave. The others finished their wine and followed, more courteously.

“Shall I bring you supper, my lord?” Jon asked.

“*Corn*,” the raven cried. Mormont did not answer at once. When he did he said only, “Did your wolf find game today?”

“He’s not back yet.”

“We could do with fresh meat.” Mormont dug into a sack and offered his raven a handful of corn. “You think I’m wrong to keep the rangers close?”

“That’s not for me to say, my lord.”

“It is if you’re asked.”

“If the rangers must stay in sight of the Fist, I don’t see how they can hope to find my uncle,” Jon admitted.

“They can’t.” The raven pecked at the kernels in the Old Bear’s palm. “Two hundred men or ten thousand, the country is too vast.” The corn gone, Mormont turned his hand over.

“You would not give up the search?”

“Maester Aemon thinks you clever.” Mormont moved the raven to his shoulder. The bird tilted its head to one side, little eyes a-glitter.

The answer was there. “Is it... it seems to me that it might be easier for one man to find two hundred than for two hundred to find one.”

The raven gave a cackling scream, but the Old Bear smiled through the grey of his beard. “This many men and horses leave a trail even Aemon could follow. On this hill, our fires ought to be visible as far off as the

foothills of the Frostfangs. If Ben Stark is alive and free, he will come to us, I have no doubt.”

“Yes,” said Jon, “but... what if...”

“...he’s dead?” Mormont asked, not unkindly.

Jon nodded, reluctantly.

“*Dead*,” the raven said. “*Dead. Dead.*”

“He may come to us anyway,” the Old Bear said. “As Othor did, and Jafer Flowers. I dread that as much as you, Jon, but we must admit the possibility.”

“*Dead*,” his raven cawed, ruffling its wings. Its voice grew louder and more shrill. “*Dead.*”

Mormont stroked the bird’s black feathers, and stifled a sudden yawn with the back of his hand. “I will forsake supper, I believe. Rest will serve me better. Wake me at first light.”

“Sleep well, my lord.” Jon gathered up the empty cups and stepped outside. He heard distant laughter, the plaintive sound of pipes. A great blaze was crackling in the center of the camp, and he could smell stew cooking. The Old Bear might not be hungry, but Jon was. He drifted over toward the fire.

Dywen was holding forth, spoon in hand. “I know this wood as well as any man alive, and I tell you, I wouldn’t care to ride through it alone tonight. Can’t you smell it?”

Grenn was staring at him with wide eyes, but Dolorous Edd said, “All I smell is the shit of two hundred horses. And this stew. Which has a similar aroma, now that I come to sniff it.”

“I’ve got your *similar aroma* right here.” Hake patted his dirk. Grumbling, he filled Jon’s bowl from the kettle.

The stew was thick with barley, carrot, and onion, with here and there a ragged shred of salt beef, softened in the cooking.

“What is it you smell, Dywen?” asked Grenn.

The forester sucked on his spoon a moment. He had taken out his teeth. His face was leathery and wrinkled, his hands gnarled as old roots. "Seems to me like it smells... well... *cold*."

"Your head's as wooden as your teeth," Hake told him. "There's no smell to cold."

*There is*, thought Jon, remembering the night in the Lord Commander's chambers. *It smells like death*. Suddenly he was not hungry anymore. He gave his stew to Grenn, who looked in need of an extra supper to warm him against the night.

The wind was blowing briskly when he left. By morning, frost would cover the ground, and the tent ropes would be stiff and frozen. A few fingers of spiced wine sloshed in the bottom of the kettle. Jon fed fresh wood to the fire and put the kettle over the flames to reheat. He flexed his fingers as he waited, squeezing and spreading until the hand tingled. The first watch had taken up their stations around the perimeter of the camp. Torches flickered all along the ringwall. The night was moonless, but a thousand stars shone overhead.

A sound rose out of the darkness, faint and distant, but unmistakable: the howling of wolves. Their voices rose and fell, a chilly song, and lonely. It made the hairs rise along the back of his neck. Across the fire, a pair of red eyes regarded him from the shadows. The light of the flames made them glow.

"Ghost," Jon breathed, surprised. "So you came inside after all, eh?" The white wolf often hunted all night; he had not expected to see him again till daybreak. "Was the hunting so bad?" he asked. "Here. To me, Ghost."

The direwolf circled the fire, sniffing Jon, sniffing the wind, never still. It did not seem as if he were after meat right now. *When the dead came walking, Ghost knew. He woke me, warned me*. Alarmed, he got to his feet. "is something out there? Ghost, do you have a scent?" *Dywen said he smelled cold*.

The direwolf loped off, stopped, looked back. *He wants me to follow*. Pulling up the hood of his cloak, Jon walked away from the tents, away from the warmth of his fire, past the lines of shaggy little garrons. One of



the horses whickered nervously when Ghost padded by. Jon soothed him with a word and paused to stroke his muzzle. He could hear the wind whistling through cracks in the rocks as they neared the ringwall. A voice called out a challenge. Jon stepped into the torchlight. "I need to fetch water for the Lord Commander."

"Go on, then," the guard said. "Be quick about it." Huddled beneath his black cloak, with his hood drawn up against the wind, the man never even looked to see if he had a bucket.

Jon slipped sideways between two sharpened stakes while Ghost slid beneath them. A torch had been thrust down into a crevice, its flames flying pale orange banners when the gusts came. He snatched it up as he squeezed through the gap between the stones. Ghost went racing down the hill. Jon followed more slowly, the torch thrust out before him as he made his descent. The camp sounds faded behind him. The night was black, the slope steep, stony, and uneven. A moment's inattention would be a sure way to break an ankle... or his neck. *What am I doing?* he asked himself as he picked his way down.

The trees stood beneath him, warriors armored in bark and leaf, deployed in their silent ranks awaiting the command to storm the hill. Black, they seemed... it was only when his torchlight brushed against them that Jon glimpsed a flash of green. Faintly, he heard the sound of water flowing over rocks. Ghost vanished in the underbrush. Jon struggled after him, listening to the call of the brook, to the leaves sighing in the wind. Branches clutched at his cloak, while overhead thick limbs twined together and shut out the stars.

He found Ghost lapping from the stream. "*Ghost*," he called, "to me. *Now*." When the direwolf raised his head, his eyes glowed red and baleful, and water streamed down from his jaws like slaver. There was something fierce and terrible about him in that instant. And then he was off, bounding past Jon, racing through the trees. "*Ghost, no, stay*," he shouted, but the wolf paid no heed. The lean white shape was swallowed by the dark, and Jon had only two choices—to climb the hill again, alone, or to follow.

He followed, angry, holding the torch out low so he could see the rocks that threatened to trip him with every step, the thick roots that seemed to grab at his feet, the holes where a man could twist an ankle. Every few feet he called again for Ghost, but the night wind was swirling amongst the trees and it drank the words. *This is madness*, he thought as he plunged deeper into the trees. He was about to turn back when he glimpsed a flash of white off ahead and to the right, back toward the hill. He jogged after it, cursing under his breath.

A quarter way around the Fist he chased the wolf before he lost him again. Finally he stopped to catch his breath amidst the scrub, thorns, and tumbled rocks at the base of the hill. Beyond the torchlight, the dark pressed close.

A soft scrabbling noise made him turn. Jon moved toward the sound, stepping carefully among boulders and thornbushes. Behind a fallen tree, he came on Ghost again. The direwolf was digging furiously, kicking up dirt.

“What have you found?” Jon lowered the torch, revealing a rounded mound of soft earth. *A grave*, he thought. *But whose?*

He knelt, jammed the torch into the ground beside him. The soil was loose, sandy. Jon pulled it out by the fistful. There were no stones, no roots. Whatever was here had been put here recently. Two feet down, his fingers touched cloth. He had been expecting a corpse, fearing a corpse, but this was something else. He pushed against the fabric and felt small, hard shapes beneath, unyielding. There was no smell, no sign of graveworms. Ghost backed off and sat on his haunches, watching.

Jon brushed the loose soil away to reveal a rounded bundle perhaps two feet across. He jammed his fingers down around the edges and worked it loose. When he pulled it free, whatever was inside shifted and clinked. *Treasure*, he thought, but the shapes were wrong to be coins, and the *sound* was wrong for metal.

A length of frayed rope bound the bundle together. Jon unsheathed his dagger and cut it, groped for the edges of the cloth, and pulled. The bundle turned, and its contents spilled out onto the ground, glittering dark and bright. He saw a dozen knives, leaf-shaped spearheads, numerous

arrowheads. Jon picked up a dagger blade, featherlight and shiny black, hiltless. Torchlight ran along its edge, a thin orange line that spoke of razor sharpness. *Dragonglass. What the maesters call obsidian.* Had Ghost uncovered some ancient cache of the children of the forest, buried here for thousands of years? The Fist of the First Men was an old place, only...

Beneath the dragonglass was an old warhorn, made from an auroch's horn and banded in bronze. Jon shook the dirt from inside it, and a stream of arrowheads fell out. He let them fall, and pulled up a corner of the cloth the weapons had been wrapped in, rubbing it between his fingers. *Good wool, thick, a double weave, damp but not rotted.* It could not have been long in the ground. And it was *dark*. He seized a handful and pulled it close to the torch. *Not dark. Black.*

Even before Jon stood and shook it out, he knew what he had: the black cloak of a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch.