



JON

The world was grey darkness, smelling of pine and moss and cold. Pale mists rose from the black earth as the riders threaded their way through the scatter of stones and scraggly trees, down toward the welcoming fires strewn like jewels across the floor of the river valley below. There were more fires than Jon Snow could count, hundreds of fires, thousands, a second river of flickery lights along the banks of the icy white Milkwater. The fingers of his sword hand opened and closed.

They descended the ridge without banners or trumpets, the quiet broken only by the distant murmur of the river, the cllop of hooves, and the clacking of Rattleshirt's bone armor. Somewhere above an eagle soared on great blue-grey wings, while below came men and dogs and horses and one white direwolf.

A stone bounced down the slope, disturbed by a passing hoof, and Jon saw Ghost turn his head at the sudden sound. He had followed the riders at a distance all day, as was his custom, but when the moon rose over the soldier pines he'd come bounding up, red eyes aglow. Rattleshirt's dogs greeted him with a chorus of snarls and growls and wild barking, as ever, but the direwolf paid them no mind. Six days ago, the largest hound had attacked him from behind as the wildlings camped for the night, but Ghost had turned and lunged, sending the dog fleeing with a bloody haunch. The rest of the pack maintained a healthy distance after that.

Jon Snow's garron whickered softly, but a touch and a soft word soon quieted the animal. Would that his own fears could be calmed so easily. He was all in black, the black of the Night's Watch, but the enemy rode before and behind. *Wildlings, and I am with them.* Ygritte wore the cloak of Qhorin Halfhand. Lenyl had his hauberk, the big spearwife Ragwyle his gloves, one of the bowmen his boots. Qhorin's helm had been won by the short homely man called Longspear Ryk, but it fit poorly on his narrow head, so he'd given that to Ygritte as well. And Rattleshirt had Qhorin's bones in his bag, along with the bloody head of Ebben, who set out with Jon to scout the Skirling Pass. *Dead, all dead but me, and I am dead to the world.*

Ygritte rode just behind him. In front was Longspear Ryk. The Lord of Bones had made the two of them his guards. "If the crow flies, I'll boil your bones as well," he warned them when they had set out, smiling through the crooked teeth of the giant's skull he wore for a helm.

Ygritte hooted at him. "*You* want to guard him? If you want us to do it, leave us be and we'll do it."

These are a free folk indeed, Jon saw. Rattleshirt might lead them, but none of them were shy in talking back to him.

The wildling leader fixed him with an unfriendly stare. "Might be you fooled these others, crow, but don't think you'll be fooling Mance. He'll take one look at you and know you're false. And when he does, I'll make a cloak of your wolf there, and open your soft boy's belly and sew a weasel up inside."

Jon's sword hand opened and closed, flexing the burned fingers beneath the glove, but Longspear Ryk only laughed. "And where would you find a weasel in the snow?"

That first night, after a long day ahorse, they made camp in a shallow stone bowl atop a nameless mountain, huddling close to the fire while the snow began to fall. Jon watched the flakes melt as they drifted over the flames. Despite his layers of wool and fur and leather, he'd felt cold to the bone. Ygritte sat beside him after she had eaten, her hood pulled up and her hands tucked into her sleeves for warmth. "When Mance hears how you did for Halfhand, he'll take you quick enough," she told him.

“Take me for what?”

The girl laughed scornfully. “For one o’ us. D’ya think you’re the first crow ever flew down off the Wall? In your hearts you all want to fly free.”

“And when I’m free,” he said slowly, “will I be free to go?”

“Sure you will.” She had a warm smile, despite her crooked teeth. “And we’ll be free to kill you. It’s *dangerous* being free, but most come to like the taste o’ it.” She put her gloved hand on his leg, just above the knee. “You’ll see.”

I will, thought Jon. *I will see, and hear, and learn, and when I have I will carry the word back to the Wall.* The wildlings had taken him for an oathbreaker, but in his heart he was still a man of the Night’s Watch, doing the last duty that Qhorin Halfhand had laid on him. *Before I killed him.*

At the bottom of the slope they came upon a little stream flowing down from the foothills to join the Milkwater. It looked all stones and glass, though they could hear the sound of water running beneath the frozen surface. Rattleshirt led them across, shattering the thin crust of ice.

Mance Rayder’s outriders closed in as they emerged. Jon took their measure with a glance: eight riders, men and women both, clad in fur and boiled leather, with here and there a helm or bit of mail. They were armed with spears and fire-hardened lances, all but their leader, a fleshy blond man with watery eyes who bore a great curved scythe of sharpened steel. *The Weeper*, he knew at once. The black brothers told tales of this one. Like Rattleshirt and Harma Dogshead and Alfyn Crowkiller, he was a known raider.

“The Lord o’ Bones,” the Weeper said when he saw them. He eyed Jon and his wolf. “Who’s this, then?”

“A crow come over,” said Rattleshirt, who preferred to be called the Lord of Bones, for the clattering armor he wore. “He was afraid I’d take his bones as well as Halfhand’s.” He shook his sack of trophies at the other wildlings.

“He slew Qhorin Halfhand,” said Longspear Ryk. “Him and that wolf o’ his.”

“And did for Orell too,” said Rattleshirt.

“The lad’s a warg, or close enough,” put in Ragwyle, the big spearwife. “His wolf took a piece o’ Halfhand’s leg.”

The Weeper’s red rheumy eyes gave Jon another look. “Aye? Well, he has a wolfish cast to him, now as I look close. Bring him to Mance, might be he’ll keep him.” He wheeled his horse around and galloped off, his riders hard behind him.

The wind was blowing wet and heavy as they crossed the valley of the Milkwater and rode singlefile through the river camp. Ghost kept close to Jon, but the scent of him went before them like a herald, and soon there were wildling dogs all around them, growling and barking. Lenyl screamed at them to be quiet, but they paid him no heed. “They don’t much care for that beast o’ yours,” Longspear Ryk said to Jon.

“They’re dogs and he’s a wolf,” said Jon. “They know he’s not their kind.” *No more than I am yours.* But he had his duty to be mindful of, the task Qhorin Halfhand had laid upon him as they shared that final fire—to play the part of turncloak, and find whatever it was that the wildlings had been seeking in the bleak cold wilderness of the Frostfangs. “Some *power*,” Qhorin had named it to the Old Bear, but he had died before learning what it was, or whether Mance Rayder had found it with his digging.

There were cookfires all along the river, amongst wayns and carts and sleds. Many of the wildlings had thrown up tents, of hide and skin and felted wool. Others sheltered behind rocks in crude lean-tos, or slept beneath their wagons. At one fire Jon saw a man hardening the points of long wooden spears and tossing them in a pile. Elsewhere two bearded youths in boiled leather were sparring with staffs, leaping at each other over the flames, grunting each time one landed a blow. A dozen women sat nearby in a circle, fletching arrows.

Arrows for my brothers, Jon thought. Arrows for my father’s folk, for the people of Winterfell and Deepwood Motte and the Last Hearth. Arrows for the north.

But not all he saw was warlike. He saw women dancing as well, and heard a baby crying, and a little boy ran in front of his garron, all bundled up in fur and breathless from play. Sheep and goats wandered freely, while oxen plodded along the riverbank in search of grass. The smell of roast

mutton drifted from one cookfire, and at another he saw a boar turning on a wooden spit.

In an open space surrounded by tall green soldier pines, Rattleshirt dismounted. "We'll make camp here," he told Lenyl and Ragwyle and the others. "Feed the horses, then the dogs, then yourself. Ygritte, Longspear, bring the crow so Mance can have his look. We'll gut him after."

They walked the rest of the way, past more cookfires and more tents, with Ghost following at their heels. Jon had never seen so many wildlings. He wondered if anyone ever had. *The camp goes on forever, he reflected, but it's more a hundred camps than one, and each more vulnerable than the last.* Stretched out over long leagues, the wildlings had no defenses to speak of, no pits nor sharpened stakes, only small groups of outriders patrolling their perimeters. Each group or clan or village had simply stopped where they wanted, as soon as they saw others stopping or found a likely spot. *The free folk.* If his brothers were to catch them in such disarray, many of them would pay for that freedom with their life's blood. They had numbers, but the Night's Watch had discipline, and in battle discipline beats numbers nine times of every ten, his father had once told him.

There was no doubting which tent was the king's. It was thrice the size of the next largest he'd seen, and he could hear music drifting from within. Like many of the lesser tents it was made of sewn hides with the fur still on, but Mance Rayder's hides were the shaggy white pelts of snow bears. The peaked roof was crowned with a huge set of antlers from one of the giant elks that had once roamed freely throughout the Seven Kingdoms, in the times of the First Men.

Here at least they found defenders; two guards at the flap of the tent, leaning on tall spears with round leather shields strapped to their arms. When they caught sight of Ghost, one of them lowered his spearpoint and said, "That beast stays here."

"Ghost, stay," Jon commanded. The direwolf sat.

"Longspear, watch the beast." Rattleshirt yanked open the tent and gestured Jon and Ygritte inside.

The tent was hot and smoky. Baskets of burning peat stood in all four corners, filling the air with a dim reddish light. More skins carpeted the

ground. Jon felt utterly alone as he stood there in his blacks, awaiting the pleasure of the turncloak who called himself King-beyond-the-Wall. When his eyes had adjusted to the smoky red gloom, he saw six people, none of whom paid him any mind. A dark young man and a pretty blonde woman were sharing a horn of mead. A pregnant woman stood over a brazier cooking a brace of hens, while a grey-haired man in a tattered cloak of black and red sat crosslegged on a pillow, playing a lute and singing:

*The Dornishman's wife was as fair as the sun,
and her kisses were warmer than spring.
But the Dornishman's blade was made of black steel,
and its kiss was a terrible thing.*

Jon knew the song, though it was strange to hear it here, in a shaggy hide tent beyond the Wall, ten thousand leagues from the red mountains and warm winds of Dorne.

Rattleshirt took off his yellowed helm as he waited for the song to end. Beneath his bone-and-leather armor he was a small man, and the face under the giant's skull was ordinary, with a knobby chin, thin mustache, and sallow, pinched cheeks. His eyes were close-set, one eyebrow creeping all the way across his forehead, dark hair thinning back from a sharp widow's peak.

*The Dornishman's wife would sing as she bathed,
in a voice that was sweet as a peach,
But the Dornishman's blade had a song of its own,
and a bite sharp and cold as a leech.*

Beside the brazier, a short but immensely broad man sat on a stool, eating a hen off a skewer. Hot grease was running down his chin and into his snow-white beard, but he smiled happily all the same. Thick gold bands graven with runes bound his massive arms, and he wore a heavy shirt of black ringmail that could only have come from a dead ranger. A few feet away, a taller, leaner man in a leather shirt sewn with bronze scales stood frowning over a map, a two-handed greatsword slung across his back in a leather sheath. He was straight as a spear, all long wiry muscle, clean-shaved, bald, with a strong straight nose and deepset grey eyes. He might even have been comely if he'd had ears, but he had lost both along the way,

whether to frostbite or some enemy's knife Jon could not tell. Their lack made the man's head seem narrow and pointed.

Both the white-bearded man and the bald one were warriors, that was plain to Jon at a glance. *These two are more dangerous than Rattleshirt by far.* He wondered which was Mance Rayder.

*As he lay on the ground with the darkness around,
and the taste of his blood on his tongue,
His brothers knelt by him and prayed him a prayer,
and he smiled and he laughed and he sung,
"Brothers, oh brothers, my days here are done,
the Dornishman's taken my life,
But what does it matter, for all men must die,
and I've tasted the Dornishman's wife!"*

As the last strains of "The Dornishman's Wife" faded, the bald earless man glanced up from his map and scowled ferociously at Rattleshirt and Ygritte, with Jon between them. "What's this?" he said. "A crow?"

"The black bastard what gutted Orell," said Rattleshirt, "and a bloody warg as well."

"You were to kill them all."

"This one come over," explained Ygritte. "He slew Qhorin Halfhand with his own hand."

"This *boy*?" The earless man was angered by the news. "The Halfhand should have been mine. Do you have a name, crow?"

"Jon Snow, Your Grace." He wondered whether he was expected to bend the knee as well.

"Your Grace?" The earless man looked at the big white-bearded one. "You see. He takes me for a king."

The bearded man laughed so hard he sprayed bits of chicken everywhere. He rubbed the grease from his mouth with the back of a huge hand. "A blind boy, must be. Who ever heard of a king without ears? Why, his crown would fall straight down to his neck! Har!" He grinned at Jon, wiping his fingers clean on his breeches. "Close your beak, crow. Spin yourself around, might be you'd find who you're looking for."

Jon turned.

The singer rose to his feet. "I'm Mance Rayder," he said as he put aside the lute. "And you are Ned Stark's bastard, the Snow of Winterfell."

Stunned, Jon stood speechless for a moment, before he recovered enough to say, "How . . . how could you know . . ."

"That's a tale for later," said Mance Rayder. "How did you like the song, lad?"

"Well enough. I'd heard it before."

"*But what does it matter, for all men must die,*" the King-beyond-the-Wall said lightly, "*and I've tasted the Dornishman's wife.* Tell me, does my Lord of Bones speak truly? Did you slay my old friend the Halfhand?"

"I did." *Though it was his doing more than mine.*

"The Shadow Tower will never again seem as fearsome," the king said with sadness in his voice. "Qhorin was my enemy. But also my brother, once. So . . . shall I thank you for killing him, Jon Snow? Or curse you?" He gave Jon a mocking smile.

The King-beyond-the-Wall looked nothing like a king, nor even much a wildling. He was of middling height, slender, sharp-faced, with shrewd brown eyes and long brown hair that had gone mostly to grey. There was no crown on his head, no gold rings on his arms, no jewels at his throat, not even a gleam of silver. He wore wool and leather, and his only garment of note was his ragged black wool cloak, its long tears patched with faded red silk.

"You ought to thank me for killing your enemy," Jon said finally, "and curse me for killing your friend."

"*Har!*" boomed the white-bearded man. "Well answered!"

"Agreed." Mance Rayder beckoned Jon closer. "If you would join us, you'd best know us. The man you took for me is Styr, Magnar of Thenn. *Magnar* means 'lord' in the Old Tongue." The earless man stared at Jon coldly as Mance turned to the white-bearded one. "Our ferocious chicken-eater here is my loyal Tormund. The woman—"

Tormund rose to his feet. "Hold. You gave Styr his style, give me mine."

Mance Rayder laughed. "As you wish. Jon Snow, before you stands Tormund Giantsbane, Tall-talker, Horn-blower, and Breaker of Ice. And here also Tormund Thunderfist, Husband to Bears, the Mead-king of Ruddy Hall, Speaker to Gods and Father of Hosts."

"That sounds more like me," said Tormund. "Well met, Jon Snow. I am fond o' wargs, as it happens, though not o' Starks."

"The good woman at the brazier," Mance Rayder went on, "is Dalla." The pregnant woman smiled shyly. "Treat her like you would any queen, she is carrying my child." He turned to the last two. "This beauty is her sister Val. Young Jarl beside her is her latest pet."

"I am no man's pet," said Jarl, dark and fierce.

"And Val's no man," white-bearded Tormund snorted. "You ought to have noticed that by now, lad."

"So there you have us, Jon Snow," said Mance Rayder. "The King-beyond-the-Wall and his court, such as it is. And now some words from you, I think. Where did you come from?"

"Winterfell," he said, "by way of Castle Black."

"And what brings you up the Milkwater, so far from the fires of home?" He did not wait for Jon's answer, but looked at once to Rattleshirt. "How many were they?"

"Five. Three's dead and the boy's here. T'other went up a mountainside where no horse could follow."

Rayder's eyes met Jon's again. "Was it only the five of you? Or are more of your brothers skulking about?"

"We were four and the Halfhand. Qhorin was worth twenty common men."

The King-beyond-the-Wall smiled at that. "Some thought so. Still . . . a boy from Castle Black with rangers from the Shadow Tower? How did that come to be?"

Jon had his lie all ready. "The Lord Commander sent me to the Halfhand for seasoning, so he took me on his ranging."

Styr the Magnar frowned at that. “Ranging, you call it . . . why would crows come ranging up the Skirling Pass?”

“The villages were deserted,” Jon said, truthfully. “It was as if all the free folk had vanished.”

“Vanished, aye,” said Mance Rayder. “And not just the free folk. Who told you where we were, Jon Snow?”

Tormund snorted. “It were Craster, or I’m a blushing maid. I told you, Mance, that creature needs to be shorter by a head.”

The king gave the older man an irritated look. “Tormund, some day try thinking before you speak. I know it was Craster. I asked Jon to see if he would tell it true.”

“Har.” Tormund spat. “Well, I stepped in that!” He grinned at Jon. “See, lad, that’s why he’s king and I’m not. I can outdrink, outfight, and outsing him, and my member’s thrice the size o’ his, but Mance has cunning. He was raised a crow, you know, and the crow’s a tricky bird.”

“I would speak with the lad alone, my Lord of Bones,” Mance Rayder said to Rattleshirt. “Leave us, all of you.”

“What, me as well?” said Tormund.

“No, you especially,” said Mance.

“I eat in no hall where I’m not welcome.” Tormund got to his feet. “Me and the hens are leaving.” He snatched another chicken off the brazier, shoved it into a pocket sewn in the lining of his cloak, said “Har,” and left licking his fingers. The others followed him out, all but the woman Dalla.

“Sit, if you like,” Rayder said when they were gone. “Are you hungry? Tormund left us two birds at least.”

“I would be pleased to eat, Your Grace. And thank you.”

“Your Grace?” The king smiled. “That’s not a style one often hears from the lips of free folk. I’m Mance to most, *The* Mance to some. Will you take a horn of mead?”

“Gladly,” said Jon.

The king poured himself as Dalla cut the well-crisped hens apart and brought them each a half. Jon peeled off his gloves and ate with his fingers,

sucking every morsel of meat off the bones.

“Tormund spoke truly,” said Mance Rayder as he ripped apart a loaf of bread. “The black crow is a tricky bird, that’s so . . . but I was a crow when you were no bigger than the babe in Dalla’s belly, Jon Snow. So take care not to play tricky with me.”

“As you say, Your—Mance.”

The king laughed. “Your Mance! Why not? I promised you a tale before, of how I knew you. Have you puzzled it out yet?”

Jon shook his head. “Did Rattleshirt send word ahead?”

“By wing? We have no trained ravens. No, I knew your face. I’ve seen it before. Twice.”

It made no sense at first, but as Jon turned it over in his mind, dawn broke. “When you were a brother of the Watch . . .”

“Very good! Yes, that was the first time. You were just a boy, and I was all in black, one of a dozen riding escort to old Lord Commander Qorgyle when he came down to see your father at Winterfell. I was walking the wall around the yard when I came on you and your brother Robb. It had snowed the night before, and the two of you had built a great mountain above the gate and were waiting for someone likely to pass underneath.”

“I remember,” said Jon with a startled laugh. A young black brother on the wallwalk, yes . . . “You swore not to tell.”

“And kept my vow. That one, at least.”

“We dumped the snow on Fat Tom. He was Father’s slowest guardsman.” Tom had chased them around the yard afterward, until all three were red as autumn apples. “But you said you saw me twice. When was the other time?”

“When King Robert came to Winterfell to make your father Hand,” the King-beyond-the-Wall said lightly.

Jon’s eyes widened in disbelief. “That can’t be so.”

“It was. When your father learned the king was coming, he sent word to his brother Benjen on the Wall, so he might come down for the feast. There is more commerce between the black brothers and the free folk than you

know, and soon enough word came to my ears as well. It was too choice a chance to resist. Your uncle did not know me by sight, so I had no fear from that quarter, and I did not think your father was like to remember a young crow he'd met briefly years before. I wanted to see this Robert with my own eyes, king to king, and get the measure of your uncle Benjen as well. He was First Ranger by then, and the bane of all my people. So I saddled my fleetest horse, and rode."

"But," Jon objected, "the Wall . . ."

"The Wall can stop an army, but not a man alone. I took a lute and a bag of silver, scaled the ice near Long Barrow, walked a few leagues south of the New Gift, and bought a horse. All in all I made much better time than Robert, who was traveling with a ponderous great wheelhouse to keep his queen in comfort. A day south of Winterfell I came up on him and fell in with his company. Freeriders and hedge knights are always attaching themselves to royal processions, in hopes of finding service with the king, and my lute gained me easy acceptance." He laughed. "I know every bawdy song that's ever been made, north or south of the Wall. So there you are. The night your father feasted Robert, I sat in the back of his hall on a bench with the other freeriders, listening to Orland of Oldtown play the high harp and sing of dead kings beneath the sea. I betook of your lord father's meat and mead, had a look at Kingslayer and Imp . . . and made passing note of Lord Eddard's children and the wolf pups that ran at their heels."

"Bael the Bard," said Jon, remembering the tale that Ygritte had told him in the Frostfangs, the night he'd almost killed her.

"Would that I were. I will not deny that Bael's exploit inspired mine own . . . but I did not steal either of your sisters that I recall. Bael wrote his own songs, and lived them. I only sing the songs that better men have made. More mead?"

"No," said Jon. "If you had been discovered . . . taken . . ."

"Your father would have had my head off." The king gave a shrug. "Though once I had eaten at his board I was protected by guest right. The laws of hospitality are as old as the First Men, and sacred as a heart tree." He gestured at the board between them, the broken bread and chicken bones. "Here you are the guest, and safe from harm at my hands . . . this

night, at least. So tell me truly, Jon Snow. Are you a craven who turned your cloak from fear, or is there another reason that brings you to my tent?"

Guest right or no, Jon Snow knew he walked on rotten ice here. One false step and he might plunge through, into water cold enough to stop his heart. *Weigh every word before you speak it*, he told himself. He took a long draught of mead to buy time for his answer. When he set the horn aside he said, "Tell me why you turned your cloak, and I'll tell you why I turned mine."

Mance Rayder smiled, as Jon had hoped he would. The king was plainly a man who liked the sound of his own voice. "You will have heard stories of my desertion, I have no doubt."

"Some say it was for a crown. Some say for a woman. Others that you had the wildling blood."

"The wildling blood is the blood of the First Men, the same blood that flows in the veins of the Starks. As to a crown, do you see one?"

"I see a woman." He glanced at Dalla.

Mance took her by the hand and pulled her close. "My lady is blameless. I met her on my return from your father's castle. The Halfhand was carved of old oak, but I am made of flesh, and I have a great fondness for the charms of women . . . which makes me no different from three-quarters of the Watch. There are men still wearing black who have had ten times as many women as this poor king. You must guess again, Jon Snow."

Jon considered a moment. "The Halfhand said you had a passion for wildling music."

"I did. I do. That's closer to the mark, yes. But not a hit." Mance Rayder rose, unfastened the clasp that held his cloak, and swept it over the bench. "It was for this."

"A cloak?"

"The black wool cloak of a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch," said the King-beyond-the-Wall. "One day on a ranging we brought down a fine big elk. We were skinning it when the smell of blood drew a shadow-cat out of its lair. I drove it off, but not before it shredded my cloak to ribbons. Do you see? Here, here, and here?" He chuckled. "It shredded my arm and

back as well, and I bled worse than the elk. My brothers feared I might die before they got me back to Maester Mullin at the Shadow Tower, so they carried me to a wildling village where we knew an old wisewoman did some healing. She was dead, as it happened, but her daughter saw to me. Cleaned my wounds, sewed me up, and fed me porridge and potions until I was strong enough to ride again. And she sewed up the rents in my cloak as well, with some scarlet silk from Asshai that her grandmother had pulled from the wreck of a cog washed up on the Frozen Shore. It was the greatest treasure she had, and her gift to me.” He swept the cloak back over his shoulders. “But at the Shadow Tower, I was given a new wool cloak from stores, black and black, and trimmed with black, to go with my black breeches and black boots, my black doublet and black mail. The new cloak had no frays nor rips nor tears . . . and most of all, no red. The men of the Night’s Watch dressed in *black*, Ser Denys Mallister reminded me sternly, as if I had forgotten. My old cloak was fit for burning now, he said.

“I left the next morning . . . for a place where a kiss was not a crime, and a man could wear any cloak he chose.” He closed the clasp and sat back down again. “And you, Jon Snow?”

Jon took another swallow of mead. *There is only one tale that he might believe.* “You say you were at Winterfell, the night my father feasted King Robert.”

“I did say it, for I was.”

“Then you saw us all. Prince Joffrey and Prince Tommen, Princess Myrcella, my brothers Robb and Bran and Rickon, my sisters Arya and Sansa. You saw them walk the center aisle with every eye upon them and take their seats at the table just below the dais where the king and queen were seated.”

“I remember.”

“And did you see where I was seated, Mance?” He leaned forward. “Did you see where they put the bastard?”

Mance Rayder looked at Jon’s face for a long moment. “I think we had best find you a new cloak,” the king said, holding out his hand.