

JON

They could see the fire in the night, glimmering against the side of the mountain like a fallen star. It burned redder than the other stars, and did not twinkle, though sometimes it flared up bright and sometimes dwindled down to no more than a distant spark, dull and faint.

Half a mile ahead and two thousand feet up, Jon judged, and perfectly placed to see anything moving in the pass below.

“Watchers in the Skirling Pass,” wondered the oldest among them. In the spring of his youth, he had been squire to a king, so the black brothers still called him Squire Dalbridge. “What is it Mance Rayder fears, I wonder?”

“If he knew they’d lit a fire, he’d flay the poor bastards,” said Ebben, a squat bald man muscled like a bag of rocks.

“Fire is life up here,” said Qhorin Halfhand, “but it can be death as well.” By his command, they’d risked no open flames since entering the mountains. They ate cold salt beef, hard bread, and harder cheese, and slept clothed and huddled beneath a pile of cloaks and furs, grateful for each other’s warmth. It made Jon remember cold nights long ago at Winterfell, when he’d shared a bed with his brothers. These men were brothers too, though the bed they shared was stone and earth.

“They’ll have a horn,” said Stonesnake.

The Halfhand said, “A horn they must not blow.”

“That’s a long cruel climb by night,” Ebben said as he eyed the distant spark through a cleft in the rocks that sheltered them. The sky was cloudless, the jagged mountains rising black on black until the very top, where their cold crowns of snow and ice shone palely in the moonlight.

“And a longer fall,” said Qhorin Halfhand. “Two men, I think. There are like to be two up there, sharing the watch.”

“Me.” The ranger they called Stonesnake had already shown that he was the best climber among them. It would have to be him.

“And me,” said Jon Snow.

Qhorin Halfhand looked at him. Jon could hear the wind keening as it shivered through the high pass above them. One of the garrons whickered and pawed at the thin stony soil of the hollow where they had taken shelter. “The wolf will remain with us,” Qhorin said. “White fur is seen too easily by moonlight.” He turned to Stonesnake. “When it’s done, throw down a burning brand. We’ll come when we see it fall.”

“No better time to start than now,” said Stonesnake.

They each took a long coil of rope. Stonesnake carried a bag of iron spikes as well, and a small hammer with its head wrapped in thick felt. Their garrons they left behind, along with their helms, mail, and Ghost. Jon knelt and let the direwolf nuzzle him before they set off. “Stay,” he commanded. “I’ll be back for you.”

Stonesnake took the lead. He was a short wiry man, near fifty and grey of beard but stronger than he seemed, and he had the best night eyes of anyone Jon had ever known. He needed them tonight. By day the mountains were blue-grey, brushed with frost, but once the sun vanished behind the jagged peaks they turned black. Now the rising moon had linmed them in white and silver.

The black brothers moved through black shadows amidst black rocks, working their way up a steep, twisting trail as their breath frosted in the black air. Jon felt almost naked without his mail, but he did not miss its weight. This was hard going, and slow. To hurry here was to risk a broken ankle or worse. Stonesnake seemed to know where to put his feet as if by instinct, but Jon needed to be more careful on the broken, uneven ground.

The Skirling Pass was really a series of passes, a long twisting course that went up around a succession of icy wind-carved peaks and down through hidden valleys that seldom saw the sun. Apart from his companions, Jon had glimpsed no living man since they’d left the wood behind and begun to make their way upward. The Frostfangs were as cruel as any place the gods had made, and as inimical to men. The wind cut like a knife up here, and shrilled in the night like a mother mourning her slain children. What few trees they saw were stunted, grotesque things growing

sideways out of cracks and fissures. Tumbled shelves of rock often overhung the trail, fringed with hanging icicles that looked like long white teeth from a distance.

Yet even so, Jon Snow was not sorry he had come. There were wonders here as well. He had seen sunlight flashing on icy thin waterfalls as they plunged over the lips of sheer stone cliffs, and a mountain meadow full of autumn wildflowers, blue coldsnaps and bright scarlet frostfires and stands of piper's grass in russet and gold. He had peered down ravines so deep and black they seemed certain to end in some hell, and he had ridden his garron over a wind-eaten bridge of natural stone with nothing but sky to either side. Eagles nested in the heights and came down to hunt the valleys, circling effortlessly on great blue-grey wings that seemed almost part of the sky. Once he had watched a shadowcat stalk a ram, flowing down the mountainside like liquid smoke until it was ready to pounce.

Now it is our turn to pounce. He wished he could move as sure and silent as that shadowcat, and kill as quickly. Longclaw was sheathed across his back, but he might not have room to use it. He carried dirk and dagger for closer work. *They will have weapons as well, and I am not armored.* He wondered who would prove the shadowcat by night's end, and who the ram.

For a long way they stayed to the trail, following its twists and turns as it snaked along the side of the mountain, upward, ever upward. Sometimes the mountain folded back on itself and they lost sight of the fire, but soon or late it would always reappear. The path Stonesnake chose would never have served for the horses. In places Jon had to put his back to the cold stone and shuffle along sideways like a crab, inch by inch. Even where the track widened it was treacherous; there were cracks big enough to swallow a man's leg, rubble to stumble over, hollow places where the water pooled by day and froze hard by night. *One step and then another*, Jon told himself. *One step and then another, and I will not fall.*

He had not shaved since leaving the Fist of the First Men, and the hair on his lip was soon stiff with frost. Two hours into the climb, the wind kicked up so fiercely that it was all he could do to hunch down and cling to the rock, praying he would not be blown off the mountain. *One step and*

then another, he resumed when the gale subsided. *One step and then another, and I will not fall.*

Soon they were high enough so that looking down was best not considered. There was nothing below but yawning blackness, nothing above but moon and stars. “The mountain is your mother,” Stonesnake had told him during an easier climb a few days past. “Cling to her, press your face up against her teats, and she won’t drop you.” Jon had made a joke of it, saying how he’d always wondered who his mother was, but never thought to find her in the Frostfangs. It did not seem nearly so amusing now. *One step and then another*, he thought, clinging tight.

The narrow track ended abruptly where a massive shoulder of black granite thrust out from the side of the mountain. After the bright moonlight, its shadow was so black that it felt like stepping into a cave. “Straight up here,” the ranger said in a quiet voice. “We want to get above them.” He peeled off his gloves, tucked them through his belt, tied one end of his rope around his waist, the other end around Jon. “Follow me when the rope grows taut.” The ranger did not wait for an answer but started at once, moving upward with fingers and feet, faster than Jon would have believed. The long rope unwound slowly. Jon watched him closely, making note of how he went, and where he found each handhold, and when the last loop of hemp uncoiled, he took off his own gloves and followed, much more slowly.

Stonesnake had passed the rope around the smooth spike of rock he was waiting on, but as soon as Jon reached him he shook it loose and was off again. This time there was no convenient cleft when he reached the end of their tether, so he took out his felt-headed hammer and drove a spike deep into a crack in the stone with a series of gentle taps. Soft as the sounds were, they echoed off the stone so loudly that Jon winced with every blow, certain that the wildlings must hear them too. When the spike was secure, Stonesnake secured the rope to it, and Jon started after him. *Suck on the mountain’s teat*, he reminded himself. *Don’t look down. Keep your weight above your feet. Don’t look down. Look at the rock in front of you. There’s a*

good handhold, yes. Don't look down. I can catch a breath on that ledge there, all I need to do is reach it. Never look down.

Once his foot slipped as he put his weight on it and his heart stopped in his chest, but the gods were good and he did not fall. He could feel the cold seeping off the rock into his fingers, but he dared not don his gloves; gloves would slip, no matter how tight they seemed, cloth and fur moving between skin and stone, and up here that could kill him. His burned hand was stiffening up on him, and soon it began to ache. Then he ripped open his thumbnail somehow, and after that he left smears of blood wherever he put his hand. He hoped he still had all his fingers by the end of the climb.

Up they went, and up, and up, black shadows creeping across the moonlit wall of rock. Anyone down on the floor of the pass could have seen them easily, but the mountain hid them from the view of the wildlings by their fire. They were close now, though. Jon could sense it. Even so, he did not think of the foes who were waiting for him, all unknowing, but of his brother at Winterfell. *Bran used to love to climb. I wish I had a tenth part of his courage.*

The wall was broken two-thirds of the way up by a crooked fissure of icy stone. Stonesnake reached down a hand to help him up. He had donned his gloves again, so Jon did the same. The ranger moved his head to the left, and the two of them crawled along the shelf three hundred yards or more, until they could see the dull orange glow beyond the lip of the cliff.

The wildlings had built their watchfire in a shallow depression above the narrowest part of the pass, with a sheer drop below and rock behind to shelter them from the worst of the wind. That same windbreak allowed the black brothers to crawl within a few feet of them, creeping along on their bellies until they were looking down on the men they must kill.

One was asleep, curled up tight and buried beneath a great mound of skins. Jon could see nothing of him but his hair, bright red in the firelight. The second sat close to the flames, feeding them twigs and branches and complaining of the wind in a querulous tone. The third watched the pass, though there was little to see, only a vast bowl of darkness ringed by the snowy shoulders of the mountains. It was the watcher who wore the horn.

Three. For a moment Jon was uncertain. *There was only supposed to be two.* One was asleep, though. And whether there was two or three or twenty, he still must do what he had come to do. Stonesnake touched his arm, pointed at the wildling with the horn. Jon nodded toward the one by the fire. It felt queer, picking a man to kill. Half the days of his life had been spent with sword and shield, training for this moment. *Did Robb feel this way before his first battle?* he wondered, but there was no time to ponder the question. Stonesnake moved as fast as his namesake, leaping down on the wildlings in a rain of pebbles. Jon slid Longclaw from its sheath and followed.

It all seemed to happen in a heartbeat. Afterward Jon could admire the courage of the wildling who reached first for his horn instead of his blade. He got it to his lips, but before he could sound it Stonesnake knocked the horn aside with a swipe of his shortsword. Jon's man leapt to his feet, thrusting at his face with a burning brand. He could feel the heat of the flames as he flinched back. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the sleeper stirring, and knew he must finish his man quick. When the brand swung again, he bulled into it, swinging the bastard sword with both hands. The Valyrian steel sheared through leather, fur, wool, and flesh, but when the wildling fell he twisted, ripping the sword from Jon's grasp. On the ground the sleeper sat up beneath his furs. Jon slid his dirk free, grabbing the man by the hair and jamming the point of the knife up under his chin as he reached for his—no, *her*—

His hand froze. "A girl."

"A watcher," said Stonesnake. "A wildling. Finish her."

Jon could see fear and fire in her eyes. Blood ran down her white throat from where the point of his dirk had pricked her. *One thrust and it's done,* he told himself. He was so close he could smell onion on her breath. *She is no older than I am.* Something about her made him think of Arya, though they looked nothing at all alike. "Will you yield?" he asked, giving the dirk a half turn. *And if she doesn't?*

"I yield." Her words steamed in the cold air.

“You’re our captive, then.” He pulled the dirk away from the soft skin of her throat.

“Qhorin said nothing of taking captives,” said Stonesnake.

“He never said not to.” Jon let go his grip on the girl’s hair, and she scuttled backward, away from them.

“She’s a spearwife.” Stonesnake gestured at the long-hafted axe that lay beside her sleeping furs. “She was reaching for that when you grabbed her. Give her half a chance and she’ll bury it between your eyes.”

“I won’t give her half a chance.” Jon kicked the axe well out of the girl’s reach. “Do you have a name?”

“Ygritte.” Her hand rubbed at her throat and came away bloody. She stared at the wetness.

Sheathing his dirk, he wrenched Longclaw free from the body of the man he’d killed. “You are my captive, Ygritte.”

“I gave you my name.”

“I’m Jon Snow.”

She flinched. “An evil name.”

“A bastard name,” he said. “My father was Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell.”

The girl watched him warily, but Stonesnake gave a mordant chuckle. “It’s the captive supposed to tell things, remember?” The ranger thrust a long branch into the fire. “Not that she will. I’ve known wildlings to bite off their own tongues before they’d answer a question.” When the end of the branch was blazing merrily, he took two steps and flung it out over the pass. It fell through the night spinning until it was lost to sight.

“You ought to burn them you killed,” said Ygritte.

“Need a bigger fire for that, and big fires burn bright.” Stonesnake turned, his eyes scanning the black distance for any spark of light. “Are there more wildlings close by, is that it?”

“Burn them,” the girl repeated stubbornly, “or it might be you’ll need them swords again.”

Jon remembered dead Othor and his cold black hands. “Maybe we should do as she says.”

“There are other ways.” Stonesnake knelt beside the man he’d slain, stripped him of cloak and boots and belt and vest, then hoisted the body over one thin shoulder and carried it to the edge. He grunted as he tossed it over. A moment later they heard a wet, heavy smack well below them. By then the ranger had the second body down to the skin and was dragging it by the arms. Jon took the feet and together they flung the dead man out in the blackness of the night.

Ygritte watched and said nothing. She was older than he’d thought at first, Jon realized; maybe as old as twenty, but short for her age, bandy-legged, with a round face, small hands, and a pug nose. Her shaggy mop of red hair stuck out in all directions. She looked plump as she crouched there, but most of that was layers of fur and wool and leather. Underneath all that she could be as skinny as Arya.

“Were you sent to watch for us?” Jon asked her.

“You, and others.”

Stonesnake warmed his hands over the fire. “What waits beyond the pass?”

“The free folk.”

“How many?”

“Hundreds and thousands. More than you ever saw, crow.” She smiled. Her teeth were crooked, but very white.

She doesn’t know how many. “Why come here?”

Ygritte fell silent.

“What’s in the Frostfangs that your king could want? You can’t stay here, there’s no food.”

She turned her face away from him.

“Do you mean to march on the Wall? When?”

She stared at the flames as if she could not hear him.

“Do you know anything of my uncle, Benjen Stark?”

Ygritte ignored him. Stonesnake laughed. “if she spits out her tongue, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

A low rumbling growl echoed off the rock. *Shadowcat*, Jon knew at once. As he rose he heard another, closer at hand. He pulled his sword and turned, listening.

“They won’t trouble us,” Ygritte said. “It’s the dead they’ve come for. Cats can smell blood six miles off. They’ll stay near the bodies till they’ve eaten every last stringy shred o’ meat, and cracked the bones for the marrow.”

Jon could hear the sounds of their feeding echoing off the rocks. It gave him an uneasy feeling. The warmth of the fire made him realize how bone-tired he was, but he dared not sleep. He had taken a captive, and it was on him to guard her. “Were they your kin?” he asked her quietly. “The two we killed?”

“No more than you are.”

“Me?” He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You said you were the Bastard o’ Winterfell.”

“I am.”

“Who was your mother?”

“Some woman. Most of them are.” Someone had said that to him once. He did not remember who.

She smiled again, a flash of white teeth. “And she never sung you the song o’ the winter rose?”

“I never knew my mother. Or any such song.”

“Bael the Bard made it,” said Ygritte. “He was King-beyond-the-Wall a long time back. All the free folk know his songs, but might be you don’t sing them in the south.”

“Winterfell’s not in the south,” Jon objected.

“Yes it is. Everything below the Wall’s south to us.”

He had never thought of it that way. “I suppose it’s all in where you’re standing.”

“Aye,” Ygritte agreed. “It always is.”

“Tell me,” Jon urged her. It would be hours before Qhorin came up, and a story would help keep him awake. “I want to hear this tale of yours.”

“Might be you won’t like it much.”

“I’ll hear it all the same.”

“Brave black crow,” she mocked. “Well, long before he was king over the free folk, Bael was a great raider.”

Stonesnake gave a snort. “A murderer, robber, and raper, is what you mean.”

“That’s all in where you’re standing too,” Ygritte said. “The Stark in Winterfell wanted Bael’s head, but never could take him, and the taste o’ failure galled him. One day in his bitterness he called Bael a craven who preyed only on the weak. When word o’ that got back, Bael vowed to teach the lord a lesson. So he scaled the Wall, skipped down the kingsroad, and walked into Winterfell one winter’s night with harp in hand, naming himself Sygerrik of Skagos. *Sygerrik* means ‘deceiver’ in the Old Tongue, that the First Men spoke, and the giants still speak.

“North or south, singers always find a ready welcome, so Bael ate at Lord Stark’s own table, and played for the lord in his high seat until half the night was gone. The old songs he played, and new ones he’d made himself, and he played and sang so well that when he was done, the lord offered to let him name his own reward. ‘All I ask is a flower,’ Bael answered, ‘the fairest flower that blooms in the gardens o’ Winterfell.’

“Now as it happened the winter roses had only then come into bloom, and no flower is so rare nor precious. So the Stark sent to his glass gardens and commanded that the most beautiful o’ the winter roses be plucked for the singer’s payment. And so it was done. But when morning come, the singer had vanished... and so had Lord Brandon’s maiden daughter. Her bed they found empty, but for the pale blue rose that Bael had left on the pillow where her head had lain.”

Jon had never heard this tale before. “Which Brandon was this supposed to be? Brandon the Builder lived in the Age of Heroes, thousands

of years before Bael. There was Brandon the Burner and his father Brandon the Shipwright, but—”

“This was Brandon the Daughterless,” Ygritte said sharply. “Would you hear the tale, or no?”

He scowled. “Go on.”

“Lord Brandon had no other children. At his behest, the black crows flew forth from their castles in the hundreds, but nowhere could they find any sign o’ Bael or this maid. For most a year they searched, till the lord lost heart and took to his bed, and it seemed as though the line o’ Starks was at its end. But one night as he lay waiting to die, Lord Brandon heard a child’s cry. He followed the sound and found his daughter back in her bedchamber, asleep with a babe at her breast.”

“Bael had brought her back?”

“No. They had been in Winterfell all the time, hiding with the dead beneath the castle. The maid loved Bael so dearly she bore him a son, the song says... though if truth be told, all the maids love Bael in them songs he wrote. Be that as it may, what’s certain is that Bael left the child in payment for the rose he’d plucked unasked, and that the boy grew to be the next Lord Stark. So there it is—you have Bael’s blood in you, same as me.”

“It never happened,” Jon said.

She shrugged. “Might be it did, might be it didn’t. It is a good song, though. My mother used to sing it to me. She was a woman too, Jon Snow. Like yours.” She rubbed her throat where his dirk had cut her. “The song ends when they find the babe, but there is a darker end to the story. Thirty years later, when Bael was King-beyond-the-Wall and led the free folk south, it was young Lord Stark who met him at the Frozen Ford... and killed him, for Bael would not harm his own son when they met sword to sword.”

“So the son slew the father instead,” said Jon.

“Aye,” she said, “but the gods hate kinslayers, even when they kill unknowing. When Lord Stark returned from the battle and his mother saw Bael’s head upon his spear, she threw herself from a tower in her grief. Her

son did not long outlive her. One o' his lords peeled the skin off him and wore him for a cloak."

"Your Bael was a liar," he told her, certain now.

"No," Ygritte said, "but a bard's truth is different than yours or mine. Anyway, you asked for the story, so I told it." She turned away from him, closed her eyes, and seemed to sleep.

Dawn and Qhorin Halfhand arrived together. The black stones had turned to grey and the eastern sky had gone indigo when Stonesnake spied the rangers below, wending their way upward. Jon woke his captive and held her by the arm as they descended to meet them. Thankfully, there was another way off the mountain to the north and west, along paths much gentler than the one that had brought them up here. They were waiting in a narrow defile when their brothers appeared, leading their garrons. Ghost raced ahead at first scent of them. Jon squatted to let the direwolf close his jaws around his wrist, tugging his hand back and forth. It was a game they played. But when he glanced up, he saw Ygritte watching with eyes as wide and white as hen's eggs.

Qhorin Halfhand made no comment when he saw the prisoner. "There were three," Stonesnake told him. No more than that.

"We passed two," Ebben said, "or what the cats had left of them." He eyed the girl sourly, suspicion plain on his face.

"She yielded," Jon felt compelled to say.

Qhorin's face was impassive. "Do you know who I am?"

"Qhorin Halfhand." The girl looked half a child beside him, but she faced him boldly.

"Tell me true. If I fell into the hands of your people and yielded myself, what would it win me?"

"A slower death than elsewhere."

The big ranger looked to Jon. "We have no food to feed her, nor can we spare a man to watch her."

"The way before us is perilous enough, lad," said Squire Dalbridge. "One shout when we need silence, and every man of us is doomed."

Ebben drew his dagger. "A steel kiss will keep her quiet."

Jon's throat was raw. He looked at them all helplessly. "She yielded herself to me."

"Then you must do what needs be done," Qhorin Halfhand said. "You are the blood of Winterfell and a man of the Night's Watch." He looked at the others. "Come, brothers. Leave him to it. It will go easier for him if we do not watch." And he led them up the steep twisting trail toward the pale pink glow of the sun where it broke through a mountain cleft, and before very long only Jon and Ghost remained with the wildling girl.

He thought Ygritte might try to run, but she only stood there, waiting, looking at him. "You never killed a woman before, did you?" When he shook his head, she said, "We die the same as men. But you don't need to do it. Mance would take you, I know he would. There's secret ways. Them crows would never catch us."

"I'm as much a crow as they are," Jon said.

She nodded, resigned. "Will you burn me, after?"

"I can't. The smoke might be seen."

"That's so." She shrugged. "Well, there's worse places to end up than the belly of a shadowcat."

He pulled Longclaw over a shoulder. "Aren't you afraid?"

"Last night I was," she admitted. "But now the sun's up." She pushed her hair aside to bare her neck, and knelt before him. "Strike hard and true, crow, or I'll come back and haunt you."

Longclaw was not so long or heavy a sword as his father's Ice, but it was Valyrian steel all the same. He touched the edge of the blade to mark where the blow must fall, and Ygritte shivered. "That's cold," she said. "Go on, be quick about it."

He raised Longclaw over his head, both hands tight around the grip. *One cut, with all my weight behind it.* He could give her a quick clean death, at least. He was his father's son. Wasn't he? Wasn't he?

"Do it," she urged him after a moment. "Bastard. *Do it.* I can't stay brave forever." When the blow did not fall she turned her head to look at

him.

Jon lowered his sword. “Go,” he muttered.

Ygritte stared.

“*Now*,” he said, “before my wits return. *Go*.”

She went.