Disclaimer: I don't own HP, GOT, or ASOIAF. Would have finished the last two properly if I had.
Edited by Bub3loka

13th Day of the 11th Moon, 303 AC

The King in the North, somewhere around the Neck.

Even when pooling his mind and magic with Winter, Jon could feel the connection with Ghost and Bloodfyre fray as he flew southward. The bond still held, but it was like an old cobweb, stretched so thin that his mind struggled to pass through. In another hundred miles, he would no longer even feel their presence.

Riding a dragon for days was a different affair from doing a short jaunt around Winterfell's hills. Winter's wings, as mighty as they had grown, tired after three hours of flight. The behemoth of scales and spikes easily matched Daenerys's black beast in stature now, but with size came fatigue and appetite to match.

Jon carried enough food for himself; his enchanted bag saw to that. But Winter demanded more than rations and rest. He would eat a deer whole and look for the next. Still, they had crossed nearly three hundred miles on the first day. A feat beyond any ship or horse in the realm, but not without a cost. Winter needed time to recover, and Jon needed to set a camp for the night in the knee-deep snow.

Other woes were quick to appear, ones that could not be dealt with fire and steel. Navigation was a trial. From the air, the North was an endless expanse of snow and pine, white hills and frozen lakes stretching as far as the eye could see. Jon had memorised countless maps, and sharing Winter's senses helped find a direction with the aid of some blood magic, but it wasn't once that they had flown off-course. Then came the blizzard that forced them from the skies, a harsh reminder that nature's fury could humble even dragons. Even so, such challenges could be weathered with caution and preparation.

Unlike other dragonriders, Jon had no fear of any danger. On the ground or in the air, he was certain of his own safety. Certain that he could deal with any threats that appeared and survive all trials that dared appear on his path. He didn't particularly wish to part, but it was a threat that had forced him to leave Winterfell.

Daenerys and her so-called Aegon. Whether he was the true son of Elia Martell, a Blackfyre, or a mummer's dragon mattered little. He was a threat, just like Daenerys. And threats had to be crushed without mercy, lest they festered, growing in size and danger.

The Targaryens had shown no signs of moving northward in a moon's time. The distance, the cold, and the snow would see any army broken long before they reached Winterfell, and even the dragonriders needed to eat and to sleep safely. More likely, Aegon sought to smash the Lannisters first; his host was already at the border of the Westerlands.

But madness and Targaryens were old companions. Trying to guess their next move was like playing chess in the dark. Still, leaving his castle undefended gnawed at Jon, a fear he tried to bury deep into his mind but never quite succeeded.

Should they recklessly strike at Winterfell while he was away, Jon would be too far away to defend everything he held dear. Even without him, there were scorpions and marksmen aplenty, and Shireen was not so easily vanquished. Flying south was a risk, but one he had chosen to take.

He had to strike first—that was the only way. Waiting for the enemy to move on their terms was death, if a slow and agonising one. Which war was won by giving your foes time to sweep their opposition, plan, and prepare?

It would be worth it if he succeeded.

Yet the anger burning in his chest remained. The unprovoked threat infuriated him to no end. The gall of Daenerys to promise she would attack Winterfell and his family!

Sensing his fury, Winter loosed a ribbon of black flame. Jon cursed, focusing—dragonfire ahead meant flying straight into it. He felt no fear for himself, but his saddle could burn. He succeeded, parting it at the last moment.

Still, Winter rumbled with mirth, and the great dragon's amused rumbles echoed through the sky.

"At least one of us finds joy in this," Jon muttered.

The die was cast, and he could only follow through.

His gaze wandered westward, where the dark waves of Ironman's Bay angrily crashed at the Flint Cliffs, and an idea took root in his mind. A short detour would not hurt. A day or two would not make a difference—if Daenerys struck at Winterfell, he'd be too far away to act regardless. And if she didn't, a small delay would go unnoticed.

14th Day of the 11th Moon

The Iron Isles

Taking a castle was a simple task with the aid of a dragon. Winter first roasted everything that dared move along the battlements, and perched on the gatehouse, blocking the only way out. Jon fought his way into the castle proper, though the defenders were quick to throw down their swords, seeing he did not tire after killing more than twenty of them.

It wasn't like anyone could match him with a blade. With his magical restraints discarded, a swing of his sword could easily cleave an armoured man in twain. It was not a challenge, it was not conduct befitting of a king, but the reaving scum deserved no such respect.

In half an hour, the scared servants gathered before him in the great hall while all the defenders were knocked out on a pile outside for later. Or, well, those who had surrendered. Jon had not accepted it, opting to knock them out.

Now, two dozen weather-worn faces glanced at him with fear and trepidation, all clad in roughspun robes and tunics of grey and brown, as dreary as the surrounding foothills. The younger ones looked glum and fretful as if he were a beast about to devour them alive. And two scullery maids were blinking at Jon suggestively, eagerly leaning in to display their assets.

He realised it wasn't just the Ironmen who were mad; the women and the children were no different. Their Iron Way clearly dulled their wits, slowing their minds. Yet it only solidified his decision further. His soul… his soul was fully healed ever since the wedding. [

"Which castle is this?" Jon asked impatiently—every moment was precious. Winter would need over three hours to rest and hunt, and Jon intended to be done by then.

His question was met with stunned silence. Jon did not need to read minds to know their thoughts. *Why would he attack a castle, not knowing its lord?*

“Are you all mutes? Answer me,” he demanded, feeling his patience dwindling dangerously low. To his chagrin, the gate and the keep were bereft of flying banners and heraldry. “*Which. Castle. Is. This*?”

“Blacktyde, m’lord,” a younger stableboy mumbled, looking at his feet. None dared meet his gaze.

Gods, it felt as if he was trying to fish every word out of their tight-lipped mouths. “Why are there so few guards?”

The castle was big, yet it only held a garrison of fewer than three score, a paltry defence for a lord in war.

“Lord Dagon took his best warriors to Old Wyk for the kingsmoot.”

Jon let out a harsh bark of laughter despite himself. Were the gods smiling down on him just this once? The kingsmoot was a sacred rite for the reavers, an old tradition where every single captain and lord of the Iron Isles gathered to choose their next leader.

It wasn’t even held in a defensible location like a stalwart fortress, just some windswept hill in the open.

No war council, battle plan, or cunning ploy could have offered him such a precious chance. A chance to get rid of the plague that was the Ironmen once and for all in one fell swoop.

“Leave,” he allowed, looking down at the trembling servants.

They were too frightened to speak for a while. Then, a wheezing hunchback man with thinning grey hair gathered his courage and cleared his throat. “Leave where, m’lord?”

“The castle. My dragon shall let you pass.”

None of them moved.

“What are you waiting for?” Jon drew his sword, and they all fled as if on fire.

Fools. They would not appreciate his mercy, even if he was tempted to add them to the knocked-out guardsmen.

Many had forgotten, but Jon did not.

The North was still at war with the Iron Isles.

Balon Greyjoy’s unprovoked attack had been a declaration inked down in blood and death, and no peace was ever agreed upon, even after the last Ironmen were expelled from the North. Even if they came to Winterfell, begging for a truce, Jon would turn them away.

This was no feud like that with the Lannisters, born of crowns and claims and shifting allegiances. It was an old grievance; the hatred ran deep, simmering beneath the surface for centuries. From the lowliest crofter to the highborn lord, every man and woman remembered. Kin put to the sword or the chain, holdfasts and villages plundered and burned. From the Age of Heroes to this day, the Ironmen had not changed their reaving ways, and the North remembered.

Jon was no butcher. He did not kill for pleasure, nor slay without cause. But cause he had plenty: vengeance, justice, and spell-forged bronze, hewn with the souls and lifeblood of the vanquished. It was

the ruthless, vicious thing to do in self-service, but there was a reason why he had not accepted surrender.

Perhaps Jon would have stayed his hand if the reavers hadn't eagerly fallen onto the North like a plague, eager to plunder, kill, and burn.

Perhaps he might have found some pity—if the Ironborn were not creatures of cruelty, who took pride in reaving, raping, and paying for it in cruelty.

Perhaps Jon would have wavered if Rickon and Bran had not perished for Greyjoy's folly, or Robb had not been cornered for it.

Yet the Ironmen all did what they did. Because they *could*. And now, Jon Stark would return the favour because he could.

If they loved their old ways so much, Jon would make the reavers pay their precious iron price until they choked on it.

The Big Liddle, Westwatch by the Bridge

He trudged along the snowy rampart, mindful of the slippery snow beneath his feet, while his gaze was fixed on the Bridge of Skulls.

At the far side of the bridge, a path up the Frostfangs wound up like a serpent.

Occasionally, Willem would walk halfway over the bridge to peer into the Gorge below for wildlings or worse, trying to sneak into the Gift. The more cunning raiders always went under instead of braving the bridge. Not all succeeded—the rocky chasm was steep and slippery, and killed more than half the fools who braved it.

"You'll take twenty men and hold Westwatch," Lord Commander Snow had ordered him nearly two years ago.

Duncan had been here since, holding the half-ruined keep and rebuilding what he could. A half-rotten, leaky roof was the first to be replaced, then followed the masonry of the two hobbled towers. It had taken moons to clear out the rats, replace the broken portcullis, and put a new gate—the old one had tumbled into the gorge after the hinges had been broken by decades of rust. Most of the men here were warriors, rangers and huntsmen, not builders—and Commander Mallister had lent them only two of these from the Shadow Tower, and only for a time.

Sometimes, a desperate band of wildlings tried to cross, but were easily repelled. Yet such attempts had grown rare as of late.

Duncan almost remembered them fondly. Almost. For all the tedium and drudgery, he felt at home here, in the westernmost castle of the Watch.

If he turned southward, he could see the snow-kissed outskirts of the Northern Mountains. It almost felt like Liddle Hall—if smaller and grimmer—but he couldn't visit. Men of the Night's Watch swore off kin and name for duty and service.

Time passed slowly here, but Duncan kept himself abreast with the happenings of the North. The grasping Bolton was taken down, and Lord Commander Snow had cast away the black for a crown. Yet

the new king had not forgotten the Watch, even after leaving its ranks. Men, supplies, and food trickled into the order with renewed vigour. Peace in the North meant prosperity, and the Starks never shied away from aiding the Wall.

Even now, the word of Big Bucket and Greatjon marching north ahead of a strong host to bolster the Watch sent a flutter of hope through the ranks. Men stood straighter, spoke louder, and held to their duty with renewed vigour and purpose. Such was the power of royal favour—when the king named you his ally, the wind itself seemed to shift behind your back.

Duncan's gaze wandered to the Shadow Tower to the east. A league away, the motley collections of towers and keeps could barely be seen huddled under the end of the Wall, and only because Westwatch was atop a higher hill.

Alas, Brandon the Builder had halted his great Wall there, where the Gorge began.

Duncan often wondered why, and he wasn't the only one. Yet an answer would never come—the Builder was long dead when the Freehold had been young.

At Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, the Wall continued well into the Bay of Seals. But here, it stopped abruptly at the Gorge, leaving a strip of nearly six miles undefended. It was not like hills stopped the Builder–many parts of the Wall twisted like a snake resting upon the crests of hills. Yet here, at the Gorge, it simply ceased. A gap in the otherwise unpassable defence. The Bridge of Skulls was the only chokepoint, narrow and easily defensible, but no match for seven hundred feet of frost. And the chasm beneath, deep and jagged as it was, could still be crossed by those desperate or mad enough to try.

He missed the Wall's chill, as strange as it sounded. There was a comfort in its cold embrace, and relief in the way it loomed above you like an impassable mountain. Here, out in the open and in the shadow of the Frostfangs' white peaks, Duncan felt naked.

He drew his black cloak tighter as the wind howled through the Gorge, biting past wool and fur to settle deep in his flesh, numbing his limbs. Winter was coming, and it would not be gentle, he knew it in his bones. The cold was an old friend to clansmen of the hills like him. High in the mountains in the Liddle Hall, Duncan had seen three winters come and go, each fiercer than the last.

This would be the kind of winter that buried villagers and could even starve holdfasts, he knew.

But he was a clansman, born in a day the snow had reached over ten feet high around Little Hall. The cold did not frighten him.

Crack!

A mighty groan rolled off the hills, echoing endlessly into the chasm below, as if the Wall itself was grunting in pain. A great chunk of ice the size of a castle tore off, tumbling down the Gorge, leaving a pale cloud of snow and dust in its wake.

The dull rumbling echo from below the Bridge of Skulls sounded like a frost giant groaning in the distance and lingered in the air for too long.

While Duncan frowned fiercely, footsteps crunching on the snow approached from behind. After so many moons of commanding the score of black brothers at Westwatch, he prided himself on his ability to tell them all apart by the sound of their steps.

And these footsteps were lazy and tumbling, belonging to a ranger named Jeffory, hailing from the Riverlands.

“The Wall again?”

Surely enough, it was Jeffory with his nasal voice. Duncan glanced at the dull-eyed man, all draped with dark-dyed wool.

“Aye—this chunk was bigger than the last,” Duncan said, jaw stiff from the cold.

“Bah, the second time this sennight?” Jeffory’s face grew grimmer. “I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I, but this is far from the first time it has happened.”

“Not so often. Never so often, not when the cold grew so deep—ice is supposed to grow thin and brittle only under the summer sun.”

The Riverlander loved his superstition, but there was some truth to his words. Duncan had noticed it too. But these were matters he could do nothing about and preferred not to dwell on. The Wall was vast, an icy behemoth stretching over a hundred leagues, and a few chunks of frost less would not diminish it. It was here long before Duncan was born, and it would still stay strong long after he died.

“What brings you here, Jeffory?” he said instead. “Something the matter with the men?”

The Riverlander shuffled uneasily.

“Nay. Or well, nothing more than the usual—grumbling about the cold and other trifles.” He moved to the flickering brazier, seeking heat but finding little. “I’m here 'cause food’s about to be done. Thought you might want to take a meal while I take this watch early.”

“Coming to stay watch on an empty belly, are you?” Duncan asked, pausing at the top of the frosted stairs.

It was rare for any man to seek to lengthen his watch or wall duty, rarer still for someone in command like him. But Duncan was no true commander of the Watch, merely a man assigned to an outpost with a small band of men, not enough to be considered a proper garrison. When the men were not enough, even the commanders stood watch. The Watch had been stretched thin even before Lord Snow had ordered every empty castle manned.

Jeffory grimaced, one hand pressed to his gut. “Stomach turned after those thrice-cursed dried walnuts,” he muttered. “Can’t even think of soup or hardtack without wanting to heave.”

Duncan gave a curt nod. “Suit yourself.”

He turned and descended the winding stairs, boots thudding against frost-bound stone.

At the base, between the two old, half-crumbling towers, was a narrow wooden hall. A modest structure, but better kept than most on this forsaken stretch of the Wall. It was warm inside, and the air was spiced with smoke and broth. The timber walls were packed with plaster and mud, holding off the worst of the wind, and the hearth blazed with a hungry fire, carefully kept running by the youngest steward.

A handful of his sworn brothers had gathered at the long table, their cloaks spilling over the benches.

“Curse this b-bloody c-cold,” Wen muttered through chattering teeth, huddling deeper into his heavy woollen cloak. He was a fool from Dorne, lured to the Wall by promises of easy battles and quick glory. There were battles, aye—but rarely easy ones. There was no glory here; it was just snow, cold, and waiting until the next danger called.

“Anything new?” asked Rory, as Duncan seated himself at the head of the table

Rory was auburn-haired and long-limbed, lean as a spear and just as sharp. A seasoned ranger in his prime and Duncan’s second, he was a man of few words. Duncan trusted him, which counted for more than skill or strength.

“Nothing,” Duncan replied, his voice hoarse from the chill outside. “Nothing but bloody cold. It’s all quiet, save for the snow and wind.”

“Should count your blessings for the quiet,” came the gravelled rasp of Nasar, a grizzled old Reachman who had worn the black for nearly thirty years. His beard was more white than brown, and he oft complained how his joints ached with every frost, but he still held his post. “Quiet and boring is good. Quiet means no dead things walkin’. Quiet means no wildling axes in your neck. Interesting is wedded with danger and death—”

“Stew’s comin’!” a voice called out from the back hall, thick with kitchen smoke and the scent of old fish.

That would be Dywan, the only soul in Westwatch who could turn dry stores into anything halfway edible. Once an apprentice cook in Gulltown—until he’d burned down his master’s pantry—he had found himself on the Wall soon after.

“Let me guess,” groaned Erwyn, slumped by the hearth. “Fockin wolf-fish again, ain’t it?”

Erwyn was young and pale-faced like a noble fop, with a well-kept golden mane and smooth face of someone who had never endured hardship. He hailed from the Westerlands, son of a minor merchant, and had taken the black rather than a gelding. Claimed he’d been seduced by a knight’s daughter. Claimed he hadn’t known she was promised. Claimed a lot of things.

No one cared. Past sins were washed away once the vows were sworn and the black was clasped over your shoulders. The problem was, Erwyn could scarcely lift a sword without fumbling it, and he whined more than a swaddling babe.

Even on a good day, his whinging was annoying, though Duncan was used to ignoring it now.

“Either that or gruel,” Rory snorted. “You’re welcome to starve if stew offends your dainty tongue. I, on the other hand, will welcome a second serving with grace.”

The only reason they had any meat at all was thanks to the wildlings, or ‘free folk’ as they liked to style themselves, who now fished along the Bay of Ice. By pact with the new king, a fortnightly tithe of fish was sent to Westwatch. It wasn’t much, and it was rarely good, but it was better than starving.

“Might as well,” Erwyn grumbled. “Damn it. Damn it all!”

“Cease your whinging,” Duncan said, weary. “You’ve food in your belly and fire at your back. If we were deeper inland, you’d be gnawing bark like a squirrel and calling it supper.”

Some of the recruits sent to the Wall weren’t worth the meat it took to keep them breathing. No amount of training could shape soft Southron merchants and spoiled brats into half-warriors. Still, some found a

spine and some steel in their hearts after training. Or they didn't last long. But fools who were too stupid to live were few and far between.

Even this golden-haired mule was not beyond saving—he stood up and joined them at the table, if while glaring at the newly arrived bowls like they were his greatest foe.

"Why don't we just collapse the Bridge of Skulls and ride back to Castle Black or the Shadow Tower?" Erwyn muttered, scowling into his stew.

"Because we were ordered to hold this wreck of a keep, not to flee like cravens," Rory replied after swallowing a mouthful of fish and onions. "And the Lord Commander didn't say a word about destroying the bloody bridge. You're welcome to try it, if you're aching to part with your head that badly."

Duncan had pondered the idea before. The bridge was old but solid stone, set into the cliffside from before the Watch had written records, and it had not faltered since. It gave them a clear sight of the Gorge and the Milkwater's path below. It was a natural chokehold, and they'd be fools to throw it away lightly.

But Erwyn, like many southron boys, didn't know when to hold his tongue.

"Why follow Snow's commands?" the Westerlander went on. "He's not Lord Commander anymore. Just a bastard who got himself a crown."

"Lord Commander Tollett hasn't recalled us," Duncan said, his voice flat. "Jon Snow's orders still stand. And it's King Jon Stark now, by the old gods and new. He may not lead the Watch anymore, but we might not have even had a Watch left without him."

Erwyn spat in disgust. The glob landed square on Duncan's boot.

"You're all afraid of shadows," he sneered. "Grumpkins, snarks, and dragons. The dead are just tales to scare children, and dragons are long dead. That bastard saw his chance and stole a throne. Men like us would lose our heads for desertion, and he gets a crown."

The fury came fast and hot. It rushed up Duncan's spine like a surging volcano. His chair scraped back with a sharp shriek, and then the world turned red.

He came back to himself on the stone floor, his limbs pinned beneath the weight of five black brothers. His chest heaved like a bellows, and his knuckles felt raw and bruised. His temples throbbed with pain.

Across the hall, Erwyn lay slumped against the wall, nose broken, blood leaking from split lips. His face was a ruin of purple and red.

"Seven bloody hells," Rory cursed. "You nearly killed him."

Duncan blinked, and the receding rage left a familiar hollowness in his chest. He was no stranger to the battle fury, as they called it up the hills. When his sister Lysara had been killed by a snow bear, he had nearly choked the life from his own brother in the training yard in a fit of rage. That was when he had taken the black.

Erwyn groaned, stirring weakly.

'Good,' Duncan thought with grim satisfaction. Let the boy live—he was a snivelling wretch, but the Watch needed even snivelling wretches these days. The southron bastard had a head for numbers, and his whining aside, he kept the ledgers and stores better than most.

"You can let me up," Duncan rasped. His brothers released him. His limbs protested as he rose slowly and stepped toward Erwyn, blood still wet on his hands.

"You listen well, boy." His voice turned as cold as the white wind. "The only reason the Watch still stands is because His Grace held it together when rebels and traitors tried to break it apart into a thousand pieces. He fought for us while the world spat on him. The Jon might be king now, but now the whole North stands behind us for it. And the dead—aye, the dead are real. I pray you never get to face them."

He spat beside the whimpering man and turned back toward the long table. His chair was overturned, and the stew spilt across the floor. Another meal wasted, and that was a direr regret.

Duncan wiped his brow and stared at the blood smeared across his fingers.

"Now we've got to haul him to the Shadow Tower to have his skull stitched back together," Rory grumbled. "And that was the last of our stew."

"Tell Dywan to scrape together some gruel," Duncan sighed, easing down onto a bench. "Better than nothing."

On days like these, he lamented his post here. But he didn't need to ask why Jon had given command of Westwatch to him and Rory. He knew why—there was no one else.

The door slammed open.

"THE DEAD!" Jeffory's voice cracked from the cold and fear. "THEY'RE COMING!"

The room froze. Duncan's blood turned to ice.

He was the first to move, snatching a torch from its sconce and rushing up the stone steps to the ramparts. The wind howled like a wounded beast, but it was not the cold that made him shiver.

Three figures crept across the Bridge of Skulls, their steps slow and shambling. Their faces were pale, half-rotten, and their hands hung loosely at their sides, black and swollen. It was the eyes that chilled him: blue as a glacier, and bright like vengeful stars.

The one at the helm was a child, no older than seven.

"Gods be good," Duncan breathed, his grip on the torch tightened.

Five more emerged from the mists beyond the Gorge. Shambling, relentless, and just as dead.

The other brothers arrived behind him, some grim, others ashen with fear. Prayers and curses rang out in a disjointed chorus. All eyes turned to Duncan, seeking guidance.

He didn't feel ready, despite knowing such a day might come. His insides felt like mush, weak and soft and useless.

"Father, give me strength…" one man whispered. "Warrior, grant me—"

"No gods will save you here, boy," Duncan barked, finding strength in the sound of his voice. "Only fire and steel. Jeffory, string your bow. You're our best marksman. The rest of you go fetch arrows, torches, and dragonglass."

"And then?"

For a heartbeat, he almost faltered when eleven more stumbled onto the bridge. This would be no easy battle.

I am the sword in the darkness.

"Then, reinforce the gate and await my command."

They moved. Relief flickered in their faces. Orders steadied them, and firm command gave them courage. Perhaps if they followed through, everything would turn out fine. But Duncan had no orders to steady him, only fear and duty.

I am the shield that guards the realms of men.

He seized one man by the shoulder before he could vanish into the chaos.

"Willem. Saddle your horse and ride to the Shadow Tower. Tell them the dead have come. Send a raven to Winterfell. The Stark must know."

I am the horn that wakes the sleepers.

The wind screamed through the Gorge, and the dead kept coming.

I am the fire that burns against the cold!

Duncan prayed, then. Not that he would be enough to hold the coming tide, but that he would not falter until relief came.