

(B) A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE, BY G.R.R. MARTIN

A GAME OF THRONES

PROLOGUE

“We should start back,” Gared said as the woods began to grow dark around them. “The wildlings¹ are dead.”

“Do the dead frighten you?” Ser Waymar Royce asked with a smile.

Gared pretended not to hear that. He was an old man, past fifty, and he had seen the lords come and go. “Dead is dead,” he said. “We have no business with the dead.”

“Are they dead?” Royce asked softly. “What proof do we have?”

“Will saw them,” Gared said. “If he says they are dead, that’s proof enough for me.”

“My mother told me that dead men sing no songs,” he said.

“My nanny said the same thing, Will,” Royce replied. “Never believe anything you hear at a woman’s tit. There are things to learn even from the dead.”

“We have a long ride before us,” Gared noticed. “Eight days, maybe nine. And night is coming.”

Ser Waymar Royce looked at the sky with no interest. “It does that every day about this time. Are you afraid of the dark, Gared?”

Will could see a kind of anger in Gared’s eyes under the thick black hood. Gared had spent forty years in the Night’s Watch, man and boy, and he was not used to being joked at. It was more than that. Under the pride, Will could see something else in the older man. It was fear.

Will felt the same. He had been four years on the Wall. The first time he had been outside the Wall, he remembered all the old stories, and his courage² fell to zero. He had laughed about it afterward. He was a veteran of a hundred rides by now, and the endless dark didn't frighten him.

Until tonight. Something was different tonight. Nine days they had been in their ride, north and northwest, farther and farther from the Wall. They were going after a band of wildling raiders. Each day had been worse than the previous. Today was the worst of all. All day, Will felt that something was watching him, something cold that didn't love.

¹ A wildling - дикое или одичавшее животное, в данном случае человек

² Courage - храбрость

Gared had felt it too. Will wanted to ride to the safe Wall. That was not a feeling to tell your commander.

Especially not a commander like this one.

Ser Waymar Royce was the youngest son of an ancient house. He was a handsome young man of eighteen, grey-eyed and graceful as a knife. On his huge black horse, the knight was above Will and Gared on their smaller ones. He wore black leather boots, black woolen pants, black gloves, and a fine coat. His cloak was made of sable, thick and black and soft. Ser Waymar had been a Brother of the Night's Watch for less than half a year, but no one could say he was bad for it. At least with his wardrobe.

It is hard to take orders from a man you laughed at.

"Mormont said that we had to track them, and we did," Gared said. "They're dead. They won't trouble us anymore. There's hard ride before us. I don't like this weather. If it snows, it will take two weeks to get back. Snow's the best variant. Have you ever seen an ice storm, my lord?"

The lord seemed not to hear him. He studied the night in his bored way. Will understood that it was better not to interrupt³ him when he looked like that.

"Tell me again what you saw, Will. All the details."

Will had been a hunter before he joined the Night's Watch. Well, a poacher⁴ in truth. He had a choice of putting on the black or losing a hand. No one could move through the woods as silent as Will, the black brothers discovered his talent very fast.

"The camp is two miles farther on, over that rock, beside a river," Will said. "I got close. There are eight of them, men and women both. No children I could see. The snow covered it, but I could still see. No fire burning. No one moving. I watched a long time. Living man can't lie so still⁵."

"Did you see any blood?"

"Well, no," Will said.

"Did you see any weapons⁶?"

"Some swords, a few bows. One man had an axe. It was on the ground beside him, right by his hand."

³ Interrupt – прерывать, вмешиваться

⁴ A poacher - браконьер

⁵ Still – неподвижный, тихий

⁶ A weapon - оружие

“Did you make note of the position of the bodies?”

“Some are sitting up against the rock. Most of them on the ground.”

“Sleeping,” Royce suggested.

“Fallen.” Will shivered.

“Are you cold?” Royce asked.

“Some,” Will answered. “The wind, my lord.”

The young lord turned back to Gared.

“What do you think killed these men, Gared?” Ser Waymar asked.

“It was the cold,” Gared said. “I saw men freeze last winter, and the one before, when I was a boy. Everyone talks about snows and the ice wind from the north, but the real enemy⁷ is the cold. At first you shiver⁸, then it burns, it does. Nothing burns like the cold. But only for a while. Then it gets inside you, after a while you don’t have the strength to fight it. It’s easier just to sit down or go to sleep. They say you don’t feel any pain toward the end. First you go and everything starts to fade, and then it’s like sinking⁹ into a sea of warm milk.”

“Such beautiful words, Gared,” Ser Waymar said. “I never thought you had it in you.”

“I’ve had the cold in me too, lord.” Gared pulled back his hood, giving Ser Waymar a good long look at his head. “Two ears, three toes, and the little finger off my left hand. We found my brother frozen at his watch, with a smile on his face.”

The lord was not surprised “You should dress more warmly, Gared.”

Gared looked at the lord; the scars around his ear holes were red with anger where Maester Aemon had cut the ears away. “We’ll see how warm you can dress when the winter comes.” He pulled up his hood.

“If Gared said it was the cold...” Will began.

“Have you had any watches last week, Will?”

“Yes, milord.” There never was a week without a dozen¹⁰ watches.

“And how did you find the Wall?”

⁷ An enemy - враг

⁸ To shiver - дрожать

⁹ To sink - тонуть

¹⁰ A dozen – дюжина

“Wet,” Will said. He saw it clear enough. “If the Wall was wet. It wasn’t cold enough.”

Royce nodded¹¹. “Bright you are. We’ve had a few light frosts last week, but surely no cold strong enough to kill eight men. Men in fur¹² and leather, with a place to hide and fire.” He smiled. “Will, lead us there. I would see these dead men for myself.”

And then there was nothing to do. The order had been given. Will went in front. Ser Waymar Royce came next. Gared was the last.

The cloudless sky turned a deep purple, then faded to black. The stars began to come out. A half-moon rose. Will was grateful for the light.

“We can go faster than this, surely,” Royce said when the moon was full risen.

“Not with this horse,” Will said. “Perhaps my lord would like to take the lead?”

Ser Waymar Royce did not react. Somewhere in the wood a wolf howled.

Will stopped his horse under an old tree.

“Why are you stopping?” Ser Waymar asked.

“It’s better to go the rest of the way on foot, my lord. It’s just over that rock.”

Royce paused a moment, staring off into the distance. A cold wind whispered¹³ through the trees. His great sable cloak stirred behind like something half-alive.

“There’s something wrong here,” Gared said.

The young lord gave him a smile. “Is there?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Gared asked. “Listen to the darkness.”

Will could feel it. Four years in the Night’s Watch, and he had never been so afraid. What was it?

“Wind. Trees rustling¹⁴. A wolf. Which sound is it that frightens you so much, Gared?” When Gared did not answer, Royce climbed down the horse. He tied the his horse away from the other horses, and took out his long sword.

“The trees stand close here,” Will warned. “That sword won’t help you, milord. Better a knife.”

“If I need instruction, I will ask for it,” the young lord said. “Gared, stay here. Guard the horses.”

¹¹ То nod - кивать

¹² Fur - мех

¹³ To whisper - шептать

¹⁴ To rustle - шелестеть

“We need a fire.” Gared said.

“How big a fool¹⁵ are you, old man? If there are enemies in this wood, a fire is the last thing we want.”

“There are some enemies a fire will keep away,” Gared said. “Bears and wolves and... and other things...”

Ser Waymar’s mouth became a hard line. “No fire.”

Gared’s hood shadowed his face, but Will was afraid the older man would go for his sword.

Finally Gared looked down. “No fire,” he whispered.

Royce turned away. “Lead on,” he said to Will.

Will tracked their way through the forest, and then started up the hill. Will made no sound as he climbed. At the top he looked down on the empty meadow¹⁶ below.

His heart stopped in his chest. For a moment he didn’t breathe. Moonlight shone down on the meadow. Everything was just as it had been a few hours ago.

They were gone. All the bodies were gone.

“Gods!” he heard behind him. Ser Waymar Royce reached the top, too.

“Get down!” Will whispered. “Something’s wrong.”

Royce did not move. He looked down at the empty meadow and laughed. “Your dead men seem to have moved camp, Will.”

It was not possible. His eyes went back over the left campsite and stopped on the axe. A huge battle-axe was still lying where he had seen it last, untouched.

“On your feet, Will,” Ser Waymar commanded. “There’s no one here. I won’t let you hide under a bush.”

So Will stood up. Ser Waymar looked him over with open disapproval¹⁷. “I am not going back to Castle Black with a failure on my first trip. We will find these men.” He looked around. “Up the tree. Be quick about it. Look for a fire.”

Will turned away, wordless. There was no use to argue. The wind was moving. He went to the tree and began to climb.

Down below, the lord called out suddenly, “Who goes there?” Will heard uncertainty¹⁸. He stopped climbing; he listened; he watched.

¹⁵ A fool - дурак

¹⁶ A meadow - поляна

¹⁷ Disapproval - неодобрение

The woods gave answer: the rustle of leaves, the icy rush of the stream, a distant sound of a snow owl.

The Others made no sound.

Will saw movement from the corner of his eye. Pale shapes moving through the wood. He turned his head, noticed a white shadow in the darkness. Then it was gone. Will opened his mouth to call down a warning, and the words seemed to freeze in his throat. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps it had only been a bird, a reflection on the snow, some trick of the moonlight. What had he seen, after all?

“Will, where are you?” Ser Waymar called up. “Can you see anything?” He was turning in a slow circle with his sword in hand. He must have felt them, as Will felt them. There was nothing to see. “Answer me! Why is it so cold?”

It was cold.

A shadow appeared from the dark of the wood. It stood in front of Royce. Tall, it was, and gaunt and hard as old bones, with flesh¹⁹ pale as milk.

Will heard Ser Waymar Royce. “Come no farther,” the lord warned. His voice cracked like a boy’s. He threw the long sable cloak back over his shoulders, to free his arms for battle, and took his sword in both hands. The wind had stopped. It was very cold.

The Other moved forward on silent feet. In its hand was a long sword like none that Will had ever seen. It was alive with moonlight.

Ser Waymar met him bravely²⁰. “Dance with me then.” He lifted his sword high over his head. His hands shivered from the weight of it, or perhaps from the cold. Yet in that moment, Will thought, he was not longer a boy, but a man of the Night’s Watch.

The Other stopped. Will saw its eyes; blue, deeper and bluer than any human eyes, a blue that burned like ice.

They appeared silently from the shadows, similar to the first. Three of them... four... five... Ser Waymar may have felt the cold that came with them, but he never saw them, never heard them. Will had to call out. It was his duty. And his death, if he did. He shivered, hugged the tree, and kept the silence.

The pale sword came shivering through the air.

¹⁸ Uncertainty - неуверенность

¹⁹ Flesh - плоть

²⁰ Bravely – храбро

Ser Waymar met it. When the blades met, there was no ring of metal on metal; only a high, thin sound, like an animal screaming in pain.

Behind him, to right, to left, all around him, the watchers stood patient, faceless, silent, almost invisible in the wood. They made no move.

Again and again the swords met. Ser Waymar's sword was white with frost; the Other's danced with pale blue light.

Then Royce was a bit too late. The pale sword bit his arm. The young lord cried out in pain. Blood drops seemed red as fire where they touched the snow.

The Other said something in a language that Will did not know; his voice was like the cracking of ice on a winter lake.

"For Robert!" Ser Waymar Royce shouted, and he came up lifting the frost-covered long sword with both hands. The Other's attack was almost lazy.

When the swords touched, a scream echoed through the forest night, and the long sword broke into a hundred pieces. Royce fell down and covered his eyes.

The watchers moved forward together, as if some signal had been given. Swords rose and fell, all in a dead silence. Will closed his eyes.

When was ready to look again, a long time had passed, and the place below was empty. He climbed down.

Royce's body lay face down in the snow. Lying dead like that, you saw how young he was. A boy.

He found what was left of the sword a few feet away. He knelt down²¹. The broken sword would be his proof. Gared would know what to make of it, and if not him, then surely that old bear Mormont or Maester Aemon. Would Gared still be waiting with the horses? He had to hurry.

Will stood up. Ser Waymar Royce stood over him. His fine clothes were torn, his face a ruin. A piece of his sword transfixing the blind white pupil²² of his left eye. The right eye was open. The pupil burned blue. It saw.

The broken sword fell from his fingers. Will closed his eyes. Long, elegant hands tightened around his neck. The touch was icy cold.

²¹ To kneel down – вставать на колени

²² A pupil – 1) ученик; 2) зрачок