

The Line in the Snow

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The bitter northern wind howled against the ancient stones of the wall. Morgan looked over the worn battlements, and shivered.

He was accustomed to the cold; he'd lived most of his life about a day's ride north of the wall. Weather like this was commonplace, and winter had only just begun. It would only get colder in the days to come.

In fact, Morgan appreciated the frigid weather: It gave him an excuse for his trembling. He didn't want to seem afraid, but Morgan knew full well that he wasn't shaking because of the wind.

To his right, Morgan's friend Norin wasn't doing quite so good a job of hiding his fear. The man, who Morgan doubted had seen (or would see) his eighteenth birthday, was drumming his fingers nervously on the handle of his bow with such fervor that it could be heard over the wind. Norin had never been a brave man, but in all the battles they'd fought together Morgan had never seen him so terrified.

Orik, the man to Norin's right, glowered at him. "If you're tryin' to drown out their drumming with your own," he grumbled, "it ain't going to work."

Norin managed to stammer out an apology albeit in more syllables than usual.

Morgan turned to his friend, and tried in vain to calm him down. "Don't worry, we'll be fine. We've got this big old wall, don't we? That's certainly going to slow them down."

Norin wasn't convinced. "This wall isn't going to stop them. They've got ladders, and ropes, and who knows what else. And besides, just look at how many there are. Even if only one in ten made it up the wall, they'd still have more than enough to overrun us."

Morgan couldn't argue with that. Looking down at the approaching horde, he saw more torches than there were men on the wall. And judging from the distance between the lights, he figured there was only one torch for every dozen or so warriors marching towards them.

"We're all going to die," Norin continued, "They're going to kill us all, and there's nothing we can do to stop them."

A gruff voice from behind them retorted: "They probably will. So what?"

They turned to find themselves facing their commanding officer, Captain Hardison. Hardison looked along the wall at his men, and raised his voice against the wind as he continued: "The boy's right. We've all likely seen our last sunset just a few hours past. Those savages more than outnumber us, and they don't exactly strike me as the merciful type. But you know what? That doesn't scare me. Don't get me wrong: I ain't eager to die. I know I'm not as young as you lot, but I've still got years left in me. Not that they're gonna let me see them. But the thought of one of these brutes cutting me down doesn't make me terrified. No, it makes me mad as hell. Just who do they think they are? They figure just because they're big and strong, and there's whole damn

mess of them, they can do whatever the hell they want? They think 'cause there's more of them than there are of us, that gives them the right to take the land we grew up in? I don't think so. So we're drawing the line. This wall is our line in the snow, and we're telling them that we aren't just going to let cross for nothing. Taking my homeland comes with a price, and I plan on making 'em pay every last damn copper.

"Norin's right. We can't stop them. But that isn't what we're here to do. We're here to hold them off long enough to buy our families the time to get as far from this wall as they can. If we can slow them down here, that might be long enough for the royal legion to get itself together and come try and finish the job we started. And if we take enough of these monsters with us tonight, our boys in the legion just might win."

Orik interrupted: "So we're here to throw ourselves on their swords and hope they trip on our corpses? Those legionnaires in their fancy polished armor are going to take their sweet time getting their spears all in order, while we get slaughtered out here?"

Hardison's reply was grim. "Yeah, that about sums it up. I'm not feeling a whole lot of love for our brothers in the legion. But I'd still prefer they win then our friends down there. There's no way we can take our anger out on the legion, at least not without running north and abandoning this wall to the horde that's coming for us. So instead, I'm going to save my hate on the arrogant whelps who're about to come knocking on our door.

"You know what we're going to do? We're going to make them suffer. We're going to make them bleed. We're going to kill every barbarian we can, and then a few more for good measure. When you look at them, I want you to see the monster that wants you dead. That wants your friends and family dead. The beast that wants to burn your homes and ravage our country.

"For every man they bring down, I want you to return the favor threefold. I want you to die spitting in their faces, punishing their insolence with your last breath. I want them pushing each other forward, fighting over the privilege of being the last one in. I want them wishing that they had stayed where it was nice and warm, where there weren't a couple hundred furious men raining arrows down on them. I want them cursing the name of the warlord that decided that our land was worth them dying by the hundreds."

Hardison stepped to the battlements to look at the approaching army. "They're almost in range now. Get your bows up, and get ready to show them Northern hospitality!"

Morgan brought up his longbow, nocked an arrow and then, hands perfectly steady, took aim.