



JON

He dreamt he was back in Winterfell, limping past the stone kings on their thrones. Their grey granite eyes turned to follow him as he passed, and their grey granite fingers tightened on the hilts of the rusted swords upon their laps. *You are no Stark*, he could hear them mutter, in heavy granite voices. *There is no place for you here. Go away.* He walked deeper into the darkness. “Father?” he called. “Bran? Rickon?” No one answered. A chill wind was blowing on his neck. “Uncle?” he called. “Uncle Benjen? Father? Please, Father, help me.” Up above he heard drums. *They are feasting in the Great Hall, but I am not welcome there. I am no Stark, and this is not my place.* His crutch slipped and he fell to his knees. The crypts were growing darker. *A light has gone out somewhere.* “Ygritte?” he whispered. “Forgive me. Please.” But it was only a direwolf, grey and ghastly, spotted with blood, his golden eyes shining sadly through the dark . . .

The cell was dark, the bed hard beneath him. His own bed, he remembered, his own bed in his steward’s cell beneath the Old Bear’s chambers. By rights it should have brought him sweeter dreams. Even beneath the furs, he was cold. Ghost had shared his cell before the ranging, warming it against the chill of night. And in the wild, Ygritte had slept beside him. *Both gone now.* He had burned Ygritte himself, as he knew she would have wanted, and Ghost . . . *Where are you?* Was *he* dead as well, was that what his dream had meant, the bloody wolf in the crypts? But the wolf in the dream had been grey, not white. *Grey, like Bran’s wolf.* Had the

Thenns hunted him down and killed him after Queenscrown? If so, Bran was lost to him for good and all.

Jon was trying to make sense of that when the horn blew.

The Horn of Winter, he thought, still confused from sleep. But Mance never found Joramun's horn, so that couldn't be. A second blast followed, as long and deep as the first. Jon had to get up and go to the Wall, he knew, but it was so hard . . .

He shoved aside his furs and sat. The pain in his leg seemed duller, nothing he could not stand. He had slept in his breeches and tunic and smallclothes, for the added warmth, so he had only to pull on his boots and don leather and mail and cloak. The horn blew again, two long blasts, so he slung Longclaw over one shoulder, found his crutch, and hobbled down the steps.

It was the black of night outside, bitter cold and overcast. His brothers were spilling out of towers and keeps, buckling their swordbelts and walking toward the Wall. Jon looked for Pyp and Grenn, but could not find them. Perhaps one of them was the sentry blowing the horn. *It is Mance*, he thought. *He has come at last.* That was good. *We will fight a battle, and then we'll rest. Alive or dead, we'll rest.*

Where the stair had been, only an immense tangle of charred wood and broken ice remained below the Wall. The winch raised them up now, but the cage was only big enough for ten men at a time, and it was already on its way up by the time Jon arrived. He would need to wait for its return. Others waited with him; Satin, Mully, Spare Boot, Kegs, big blond Hareth with his buck teeth. Everyone called him Horse. He had been a stablehand in Mole's Town, one of the few moles who had stayed at Castle Black. The rest had run back to their fields and hovels, or their beds in the underground brothel. Horse wanted to take the black, though, the great buck-toothed fool. Zei remained as well, the whore who'd proved so handy with a crossbow, and Noye had kept three orphan boys whose father had died on the steps. They were young—nine and eight and five—but no one else seemed to want them.

As they waited for the cage to come back, Clydas brought them cups of hot mulled wine, while Three-Finger Hobb passed out chunks of black

bread. Jon took a heel from him and gnawed on it.

“Is it Mance Rayder?” Satin asked anxiously.

“We can hope so.” There were worse things than wildlings in the dark. Jon remembered the words the wildling king had spoken on the Fist of the First Men, as they stood amidst that pink snow. *When the dead walk, walls and stakes and swords mean nothing. You cannot fight the dead, Jon Snow. No man knows that half so well as me.* Just thinking of it made the wind seem a little colder.

Finally the cage came clanking back down, swaying at the end of the long chain, and they crowded in silently and shut the door.

Mully yanked the bell rope three times. A moment later they began to rise, by fits and starts at first, then more smoothly. No one spoke. At the top the cage swung sideways and they clambered out one by one. Horse gave Jon a hand down onto the ice. The cold hit him in the teeth like a fist.

A line of fires burned along the top of the Wall, contained in iron baskets on poles taller than a man. The cold knife of the wind stirred and swirled the flames, so the lurid orange light was always shifting. Bundles of quarrels, arrows, spears, and scorpion bolts stood ready on every hand. Rocks were piled ten feet high, big wooden barrels of pitch and lamp oil lined up beside them. Bowen Marsh had left Castle Black well supplied in everything save men. The wind was whipping at the black cloaks of the scarecrow sentinels who stood along the ramparts, spears in hand. “I hope it wasn’t one of them who blew the horn,” Jon said to Donal Noye when he limped up beside him.

“Did you hear that?” Noye asked.

There was the wind, and horses, and something else. “A mammoth,” Jon said. “That was a mammoth.”

The armorer’s breath was frosting as it blew from his broad, flat nose. North of the Wall was a sea of darkness that seemed to stretch forever. Jon could make out the faint red glimmer of distant fires moving through the wood. It was Mance, certain as sunrise. The Others did not light torches.

“How do we fight them if we can’t see them?” Horse asked.

Donal Noye turned toward the two great trebuchets that Bowen Marsh had restored to working order. “Give me *light!*” he roared.

Barrels of pitch were loaded hastily into the slings and set afire with a torch. The wind fanned the flames to a brisk red fury. “*NOW!*” Noye bellowed. The counterweights plunged downward, the throwing arms rose to *thud* against the padded crossbars. The burning pitch went tumbling through the darkness, casting an eerie flickering light upon the ground below. Jon caught a glimpse of mammoths moving ponderously through the half-light, and just as quickly lost them again. *A dozen, maybe more.* The barrels struck the earth and burst. They heard a deep bass trumpeting, and a giant roared something in the Old Tongue, his voice an ancient thunder that sent shivers up Jon’s spine.

“*Again!*” Noye shouted, and the trebuchets were loaded once more. Two more barrels of burning pitch went crackling through the gloom to come crashing down amongst the foe. This time one of them struck a dead tree, enveloping it in flame. *Not a dozen mammoths, Jon saw, a hundred.*

He stepped to the edge of the precipice. *Careful*, he reminded himself, *it is a long way down.* Red Alyn sounded his sentry’s horn once more, *Aaaaahoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo, aaaaahoooooooooooooooooooo.* And now the wildlings answered, not with one horn but with a dozen, and with drums and pipes as well. *We are come*, they seemed to say, *we are come to break your Wall, to take your lands and steal your daughters.* The wind howled, the trebuchets creaked and thumped, the barrels flew. Behind the giants and the mammoths, Jon saw men advancing on the Wall with bows and axes. Were there twenty or twenty thousand? In the dark there was no way to tell. *This is a battle of blind men, but Mance has a few thousand more of them than we do.*

“The gate!” Pyp cried out. “They’re at the *GATE!*”

The Wall was too big to be stormed by any conventional means; too high for ladders or siege towers, too thick for battering rams. No catapult could throw a stone large enough to breach it, and if you tried to set it on fire, the icemelt would quench the flames. You could climb over, as the raiders did near Greyguard, but only if you were strong and fit and sure-handed, and

even then you might end up like Jarl, impaled on a tree. *They must take the gate, or they cannot pass.*

But the gate was a crooked tunnel through the ice, smaller than any castle gate in the Seven Kingdoms, so narrow that rangers must lead their garrons through single file. Three iron grates closed the inner passage, each locked and chained and protected by a murder hole. The outer door was old oak, nine inches thick and studded with iron, not easy to break through. *But Mance has mammoths*, he reminded himself, *and giants as well.*

“Must be cold down there,” said Noye. “What say we warm them up, lads?” A dozen jars of lamp oil had been lined up on the precipice. Pyp ran down the line with a torch, setting them alight. Owen the Oaf followed, shoving them over the edge one by one. Tongues of pale yellow fire swirled around the jars as they plunged downward. When the last was gone, Grenn kicked loose the chocks on a barrel of pitch and sent it rumbling and rolling over the edge as well. The sounds below changed to shouts and screams, sweet music to their ears.

Yet still the drums beat on, the trebuchets shuddered and thumped, and the sound of skinpipes came wafting through the night like the songs of strange fierce birds. Septon Cellador began to sing as well, his voice tremulous and thick with wine.

*Gentle Mother, font of mercy,
save our sons from war, we pray,
stay the swords and stay the arrows,
let them know . . .*

Donal Noye rounded on him. “Any man here stays his sword, I’ll chuck his puckered arse right off this Wall . . . starting with you, Septon. *Archers!* Do we have any bloody archers?”

“Here,” said Satin.

“And here,” said Mully. “But how can I find a target? It’s black as the inside of a pig’s belly. Where are they?”

Noye pointed north. “Loose enough arrows, might be you’ll find a few. At least you’ll make them fretful.” He looked around the ring of firelit faces. “I need two bows and two spears to help me hold the tunnel if they

break the gate.” More than ten stepped forward, and the smith picked his four. “Jon, you have the Wall till I return.”

For a moment Jon thought he had misheard. It had sounded as if Noye were leaving him in command. “My lord?”

“*Lord?* I’m a blacksmith. I said, the Wall is yours.”

There are older men, Jon wanted to say, better men. I am still as green as summer grass. I’m wounded, and I stand accused of desertion. His mouth had gone bone dry. “Aye,” he managed.

Afterward it would seem to Jon Snow as if he’d dreamt that night. Side by side with the straw soldiers, with longbows or crossbows clutched in half-frozen hands, his archers launched a hundred flights of arrows against men they never saw. From time to time a wildling arrow came flying back in answer. He sent men to the smaller catapults and filled the air with jagged rocks the size of a giant’s fist, but the darkness swallowed them as a man might swallow a handful of nuts. Mammoths trumpeted in the gloom, strange voices called out in stranger tongues, and Septon Cellador prayed so loudly and drunkenly for the dawn to come that Jon was tempted to chuck him over the edge himself. They heard a mammoth dying at their feet and saw another lurch burning through the woods, trampling down men and trees alike. The wind blew cold and colder. Hobb rode up the chain with cups of onion broth, and Owen and Clydas served them to the archers where they stood, so they could gulp them down between arrows. Zei took a place among them with her crossbow. Hours of repeated jars and shocks knocked something loose on the right-hand trebuchet, and its counterweight came crashing free, suddenly and catastrophically, wrenching the throwing arm sideways with a splintering crash. The left-hand trebuchet kept throwing, but the wildlings had quickly learned to shun the place where its loads were landing.

We should have twenty trebuchets, not two, and they should be mounted on sledges and turntables so we could move them. It was a futile thought. He might as well wish for another thousand men, and maybe a dragon or three.

Donal Noye did not return, nor any of them who’d gone down with him to hold that black cold tunnel. *The Wall is mine,* Jon reminded himself

whenever he felt his strength flagging. He had taken up a longbow himself, and his fingers felt crabbed and stiff, half-frozen. His fever was back as well, and his leg would tremble uncontrollably, sending a white-hot knife of pain right through him. *One more arrow, and I'll rest*, he told himself, half a hundred times. *Just one more*. Whenever his quiver was empty, one of the orphaned moles would bring him another. *One more quiver, and I'm done*. It couldn't be long until the dawn.

When morning came, none of them quite realized it at first. The world was still dark, but the black had turned to grey and shapes were beginning to emerge half-seen from the gloom. Jon lowered his bow to stare at the mass of heavy clouds that covered the eastern sky. He could see a glow behind them, but perhaps he was only dreaming. He notched another arrow.

Then the rising sun broke through to send pale lances of light across the battleground. Jon found himself holding his breath as he looked out over the half-mile swath of cleared land that lay between the Wall and the edge of the forest. In half a night they had turned it into a wasteland of blackened grass, bubbling pitch, shattered stone, and corpses. The carcass of the burned mammoth was already drawing crows. There were giants dead on the ground as well, but behind them . . .

Someone moaned to his left, and he heard Septon Cellador say, "Mother have mercy, oh. Oh, oh, oh, *Mother have mercy*."

Beneath the trees were all the wildlings in the world; raiders and giants, wargs and skinchangers, mountain men, salt sea sailors, ice river cannibals, cave dwellers with dyed faces, dog chariots from the Frozen Shore, Hornfoot men with their soles like boiled leather, all the queer wild folk Mance had gathered to break the Wall. *This is not your land*, Jon wanted to shout at them. *There is no place for you here. Go away*. He could hear Tormund Giantsbane laughing at that. "You know nothing, Jon Snow," Ygritte would have said. He flexed his sword hand, opening and closing the fingers, though he knew full well that swords would not come into it up here.

He was chilled and feverish, and suddenly the weight of the longbow was too much. The battle with the Magnar had been nothing, he realized, and

the night fight less than nothing, only a probe, a dagger in the dark to try and catch them unprepared. The real battle was only now beginning.

“I never knew there would be so *many*,” Satin said.

Jon had. He had seen them before, but not like this, not drawn up in battle array. On the march the wildling column had sprawled over long leagues like some enormous worm, but you never saw all of it at once. But now . . .

“Here they come,” someone said in a hoarse voice.

Mammoths centered the wildling line, he saw, a hundred or more with giants on their backs clutching mauls and huge stone axes. More giants loped beside them, pushing along a tree trunk on great wooden wheels, its end sharpened to a point. *A ram*, he thought bleakly. If the gate still stood below, a few kisses from that thing would soon turn it into splinters. On either side of the giants came a wave of horsemen in boiled leather harness with fire-hardened lances, a mass of running archers, hundreds of foot with spears, slings, clubs, and leathern shields. The bone chariots from the Frozen Shore clattered forward on the flanks, bouncing over rocks and roots behind teams of huge white dogs. *The fury of the wild*, Jon thought as he listened to the skirl of skins, to the dogs barking and baying, the mammoths trumpeting, the free folk whistling and screaming, the giants roaring in the Old Tongue. Their drums echoed off the ice like rolling thunder.

He could feel the despair all around him. “There must be a hundred thousand,” Satin wailed. “How can we stop so many?”

“The Wall will stop them,” Jon heard himself say. He turned and said it again, louder. “The *Wall* will stop them. *The Wall defends itself*.” Hollow words, but he needed to say them, almost as much as his brothers needed to hear them. “Mance wants to unman us with his numbers. Does he think we’re *stupid*?” He was shouting now, his leg forgotten, and every man was listening. “The chariots, the horsemen, all those fools on foot . . . what are they going to do to us up here? Any of you ever see a mammoth climb a wall?” He laughed, and Pyp and Owen and half a dozen more laughed with him. “They’re *nothing*, they’re less use than our straw brothers here, they can’t reach us, they can’t hurt us, and they don’t frighten us, do they?”

“*NO!*” Grenn shouted.

“They’re down there and we’re up here,” Jon said, “and so long as we hold the gate they cannot pass. *They cannot pass!*” They were all shouting then, roaring his own words back at him, waving swords and longbows in the air as their cheeks flushed red. Jon saw Kegs standing there with a warhorn slung beneath his arm. “Brother,” he told him, “sound for battle.”

Grinning, Kegs lifted the horn to his lips, and blew the two long blasts that meant *wildlings*. Other horns took up the call until the Wall itself seemed to shudder, and the echo of those great deep-throated moans drowned all other sound.

“Archers,” Jon said when the horns had died away, “you’ll aim for the giants with that ram, every bloody one of you. Loose *at my command*, not before. *THE GIANTS AND THE RAM*. I want arrows raining on them with every step, but we’ll wait till they’re in range. Any man who wastes an arrow will need to climb down and fetch it back, do you hear me?”

“I do,” shouted Owen the Oaf. “I hear you, Lord Snow.”

Jon laughed, laughed like a drunk or a madman, and his men laughed with him. The chariots and the racing horsemen on the flanks were well ahead of the center now, he saw. The wildlings had not crossed a third of the half mile, yet their battle line was dissolving. “Load the trebuchet with caltrops,” Jon said. “Owen, Kegs, angle the catapults toward the center. Scorpions, load with fire spears and loose at my command.” He pointed at the Mole’s Town boys. “You, you, and you, stand by with torches.”

The wildling archers shot as they advanced; they would dash forward, stop, loose, then run another ten yards. There were so many that the air was constantly full of arrows, all falling woefully short. *A waste*, Jon thought. *Their want of discipline is showing*. The smaller horn-and-wood bows of the free folk were outranged by the great yew longbows of the Night’s Watch, and the wildlings were trying to shoot at men seven hundred feet above them. “*Let them shoot*,” Jon said. “Wait. Hold.” Their cloaks were flapping behind them. “The wind is in our faces, it will cost us range. Wait.” *Closer, closer*. The skins wailed, the drums thundered, the wildling arrows fluttered and fell.

“*DRAW*.” Jon lifted his own bow and pulled the arrow to his ear. Satin did the same, and Grenn, Owen the Oaf, Spare Boot, Black Jack Bulwer,

Arron and Emrick. Zei hoisted her crossbow to her shoulder. Jon was watching the ram come on and on, the mammoths and giants lumbering forward on either side. They were so small he could have crushed them all in one hand, it seemed. *If only my hand was big enough.* Through the killing ground they came. A hundred crows rose from the carcass of the dead mammoth as the wildlings thundered past to either side of them. Closer and closer, until . . .

“*LOOSE!*”

The black arrows hissed downward, like snakes on feathered wings. Jon did not wait to see where they struck. He reached for a second arrow as soon as the first left his bow. “*NOTCH. DRAW. LOOSE.*” As soon as the arrow flew he found another. “*NOTCH. DRAW. LOOSE.*” Again, and then again. Jon shouted for the trebuchet, and heard the creak and heavy *thud* as a hundred spiked steel caltrops went spinning through the air. “*Catapults,*” he called, “*scorpions. Bowmen, loose at will.*” Wildling arrows were striking the Wall now, a hundred feet below them. A second giant spun and staggered. *Notch, draw, loose.* A mammoth veered into another beside it, spilling giants on the ground. *Notch, draw, loose.* The ram was down and done, he saw, the giants who’d pushed it dead or dying. “*Fire arrows,*” he shouted. “I want that ram burning.” The screams of wounded mammoths and the booming cries of giants mingled with the drums and pipes to make an awful music, yet still his archers drew and loosed, as if they’d all gone as deaf as dead Dick Follard. They might be the dregs of the order, but they were men of the Night’s Watch, or near enough as made no matter. *That’s why they shall not pass.*

One of the mammoths was running berserk, smashing wildlings with his trunk and crushing archers underfoot. Jon pulled back his bow once more, and launched another arrow at the beast’s shaggy back to urge him on. To east and west, the flanks of the wildling host had reached the Wall unopposed. The chariots drew in or turned while the horsemen milled aimlessly beneath the looming cliff of ice. “*At the gate!*” a shout came. Spare Boot, maybe. “*Mammoth at the gate!*”

“Fire,” Jon barked. “Grenn, Pyp.”

Grenn thrust his bow aside, wrestled a barrel of oil onto its side, and rolled it to the edge of the Wall, where Pyp hammered out the plug that sealed it, stuffed in a twist of cloth, and set it alight with a torch. They shoved it over together. A hundred feet below it struck the Wall and burst, filling the air with shattered staves and burning oil. Grenn was rolling a second barrel to the precipice by then, and Kegs had one as well. Pyp lit them both. “*Got him!*” Satin shouted, his head sticking out so far that Jon was certain he was about to fall. “*Got him, got him, GOT him!*” He could hear the roar of fire. A flaming giant lurched into view, stumbling and rolling on the ground.

Then suddenly the mammoths were fleeing, running from the smoke and flames and smashing into those behind them in their terror. Those went backward too, the giants and wildlings behind them scrambling to get out of their way. In half a heartbeat the whole center was collapsing. The horsemen on the flanks saw themselves being abandoned and decided to fall back as well, not one so much as blooded. Even the chariots rumbled off, having done nothing but look fearsome and make a lot of noise. *When they break, they break hard*, Jon Snow thought as he watched them reel away. The drums had all gone silent. *How do you like that music, Mance? How do you like the taste of the Dornishman’s wife?* “Do we have anyone hurt?” he asked.

“The bloody buggers got my leg.” Spare Boot plucked the arrow out and waved it above his head. “The wooden one!”

A ragged cheer went up. Zei grabbed Owen by the hands, spun him around in a circle, and gave him a long wet kiss right there for all to see. She tried to kiss Jon too, but he held her by the shoulder and pushed her gently but firmly away. “No,” he said. *I am done with kissing*. Suddenly he was too weary to stand, and his leg was agony from knee to groin. He fumbled for his crutch. “Pyp, help me to the cage. Grenn, you have the Wall.”

“*Me?*” said Grenn. “*Him?*” said Pyp. It was hard to tell which of them was more horrified. “But,” Grenn stammered, “b-but what do I do if the wildlings attack again?”

“Stop them,” Jon told him.

As they rode down in the cage, Pyp took off his helm and wiped his brow. “Frozen sweat. Is there anything as disgusting as frozen sweat?” He laughed. “Gods, I don’t think I have ever been so hungry. I could eat an aurochs whole, I swear it. Do you think Hobb will cook up Grenn for us?” When he saw Jon’s face, his smile died. “What’s wrong? Is it your leg?”

“My leg,” Jon agreed. Even the words were an effort.

“Not the battle, though? We won the battle.”

“Ask me when I’ve seen the gate,” Jon said grimly. *I want a fire, a hot meal, a warm bed, and something to make my leg stop hurting*, he told himself. But first he had to check the tunnel and find what had become of Donal Noye.

After the battle with the Thenns it had taken them almost a day to clear the ice and broken beams away from the inner gate. Spotted Pate and Kegs and some of the other builders had argued heatedly that they ought just leave the debris there, another obstacle for Mance. That would have meant abandoning the defense of the tunnel, though, and Noye was having none of it. With men in the murder holes and archers and spears behind each inner grate, a few determined brothers could hold off a hundred times as many wildlings and clog the way with corpses. He did not mean to give Mance Rayder free passage through the ice. So with pick and spade and ropes, they had moved the broken steps aside and dug back down to the gate.

Jon waited by the cold iron bars while Pyp went to Maester Aemon for the spare key. Surprisingly, the maester himself returned with him, and Clydas with a lantern. “Come see me when we are done,” the old man told Jon while Pyp was fumbling with the chains. “I need to change your dressing and apply a fresh poultice, and you will want some more dreamwine for the pain.”

Jon nodded weakly. The door swung open. Pyp led them in, followed by Clydas and the lantern. It was all Jon could do to keep up with Maester Aemon. The ice pressed close around them, and he could feel the cold seeping into his bones, the weight of the Wall above his head. It felt like walking down the gullet of an ice dragon. The tunnel took a twist, and then another. Pyp unlocked a second iron gate. They walked farther, turned

again, and saw light ahead, faint and pale through the ice. *That's bad*, Jon knew at once. *That's very bad*.

Then Pyp said, "There's blood on the floor."

The last twenty feet of the tunnel was where they'd fought and died. The outer door of studded oak had been hacked and broken and finally torn off its hinges, and one of the giants had crawled in through the splinters. The lantern bathed the grisly scene in a sullen reddish light. Pyp turned aside to retch, and Jon found himself envying Maester Aemon his blindness.

Noye and his men had been waiting within, behind a gate of heavy iron bars like the two Pyp had just unlocked. The two crossbows had gotten off a dozen quarrels as the giant struggled toward them. Then the spearmen must have come to the fore, stabbing through the bars. Still the giant found the strength to reach through, twist the head off Spotted Pate, seize the iron gate, and wrench the bars apart. Links of broken chain lay strewn across the floor. *One giant. All this was the work of one giant.*

"Are they all dead?" Maester Aemon asked softly.

"Yes. Donal was the last." Noye's sword was sunk deep in the giant's throat, halfway to the hilt. The armorer had always seemed such a big man to Jon, but locked in the giant's massive arms he looked almost like a child. "The giant crushed his spine. I don't know who died first." He took the lantern and moved forward for a better look. "Mag." *I am the last of the giants*. He could feel the sadness there, but he had no time for sadness. "It was Mag the Mighty. The king of the giants."

He needed sun then. It was too cold and dark inside the tunnel, and the stench of blood and death was suffocating. Jon gave the lantern back to Clydas, squeezed around the bodies and through the twisted bars, and walked toward the daylight to see what lay beyond the splintered door.

The huge carcass of a dead mammoth partially blocked the way. One of the beast's tusks snagged his cloak and tore it as he edged past. Three more giants lay outside, half buried beneath stone and slush and hardened pitch. He could see where the fire had melted the Wall, where great sheets of ice had come sloughing off in the heat to shatter on the blackened ground. He looked up at where they'd come from. *When you stand here it seems immense, as if it were about to crush you.*

Jon went back inside to where the others waited. “We need to repair the outer gate as best we can and then block up this section of the tunnel. Rubble, chunks of ice, anything. All the way to the second gate, if we can. Ser Wynton will need to take command, he’s the last knight left, but he needs to move *now*, the giants will be back before we know it. We have to tell him—”

“Tell him what you will,” said Maester Aemon, gently. “He will smile, nod, and forget. Thirty years ago Ser Wynton Stout came within a dozen votes of being Lord Commander. He would have made a fine one. Ten years ago he would still have been capable. No longer. You know that as well as Donal did, Jon.”

It was true. “You give the order, then,” Jon told the maester. “You have been on the Wall your whole life, the men will follow you. We have to close the gate.”

“I am a maester chained and sworn. My order serves, Jon. We give counsel, not commands.”

“Someone must—”

“You. You must lead.”

“No.”

“Yes, Jon. It need not be for long. Only until such time as the garrison returns. Donal chose you, and Qhorin Halfhand before him. Lord Commander Mormont made you his steward. You are a son of Winterfell, a nephew of Benjen Stark. It must be you or no one. The Wall is yours, Jon Snow.”