



## JON

**D**ay and night the axes rang.

Jon could not remember the last time he had slept. When he closed his eyes he dreamed of fighting; when he woke he fought. Even in the King's Tower he could hear the ceaseless *thunk* of bronze and flint and stolen steel biting into wood, and it was louder when he tried to rest in the warming shed atop the Wall. Mance had sledgehammers at work as well, and long saws with teeth of bone and flint. Once, as he was drifting off into an exhausted sleep, there came a great cracking from the haunted forest, and a sentinel tree came crashing down in a cloud of dirt and needles.

He was awake when Owen came to him, lying restless under a pile of furs on the floor of the warming shed. "Lord Snow," said Owen, shaking his shoulder, "the dawn." He gave Jon a hand to help pull him back onto his feet. Others were waking as well, jostling one another as they pulled on their boots and buckled their swordbelts in the close confines of the shed. No one spoke. They were all too tired for talk. Few of them ever left the Wall these days. It took too long to ride up and down in the cage. Castle Black had been abandoned to Maester Aemon, Ser Wynton Stout, and a few others too old or ill to fight.

"I had a dream that the king had come," Owen said happily. "Maester Aemon sent a raven, and King Robert came with all his strength. I dreamed I saw his golden banners."

Jon made himself smile. "That would be a welcome sight to see, Owen." Ignoring the twinge of pain in his leg, he swept a black fur cloak about his shoulders, gathered up his crutch, and went out onto the Wall to face another day.

A gust of wind sent icy tendrils wending through his long brown hair. Half a mile north, the wildling encampments were stirring, their campfires sending up smoky fingers to scratch against the pale dawn sky. Along the edge of the forest they had raised their tents of hide and fur, even a crude longhall of logs and woven branches; there were horselines to the east, mammoths to the west, and men everywhere, sharpening their swords, putting points on crude spears, donning makeshift armor of hide and horn and bone. For every man that he could see, Jon knew there were a score unseen in the wood. The brush gave them some shelter from the elements and hid them from the eyes of the hated crows.

Already their archers were stealing forward, pushing their rolling mantlets. "Here come our breakfast arrows," Pyp announced cheerfully, as he did every morning. *It's good that he can make a jape of it*, Jon thought. *Someone has to*. Three days ago, one of those breakfast arrows had caught Red Alyn of the Rosewood in the leg. You could still see his body at the foot of the Wall, if you cared to lean out far enough. Jon had to think that it was better for them to smile at Pyp's jest than to brood over Alyn's corpse.

The mantlets were slanting wooden shields, wide enough for five of the free folk to hide behind. The archers pushed them close, then knelt behind them to loose their arrows through slits in the wood. The first time the wildlings rolled them out, Jon had called for fire arrows and set a half-dozen ablaze, but after that Mance started covering them with raw hides. All the fire arrows in the world couldn't make them catch now. The brothers had even started wagering as to which of the straw sentinels would collect the most arrows before they were done. Dolorous Edd was leading with four, but Othell Yarwyck, Tumberjon, and Watt of Long Lake had three apiece. It was Pyp who'd started naming the scarecrows after their missing brothers, too. "It makes it seem as if there's more of us," he said.

"More of us with arrows in our bellies," Grenn complained, but the custom did seem to give his brothers heart, so Jon let the names stand and the wagering continue.

On the edge of the Wall an ornate brass Myrish eye stood on three spindly legs. Maester Aemon had once used it to peer at the stars, before his own eyes had failed him. Jon swung the tube down to have a look at the foe. Even at this distance there was no mistaking Mance Rayder's huge white tent, sewn together from the pelts of snow bears. The Myrish lenses brought the wildlings close enough for him to make out faces. Of Mance himself he saw no sign this morning, but his woman Dalla was outside tending the fire, while her sister Val milked a she-goat beside the tent. Dalla looked so big it was a wonder she could move. *The child must be coming very soon*, Jon thought. He swiveled the eye east and searched amongst the tents and trees till he found the turtle. *That will be coming very soon as well*. The wildlings had skinned one of the dead mammoths during the night, and they were lashing the raw bloody hide over the turtle's roof, one more layer on top of the sheepskins and pelts. The turtle had a rounded top and eight huge wheels, and under the hides was a stout wooden frame. When the wildlings had begun knocking it together, Satin thought they were building a ship. *Not far wrong*. The turtle was a hull turned upside down and opened fore and aft; a longhall on wheels.

"It's done, isn't it?" asked Grenn.

"Near enough." Jon shoved away the eye. "It will come today, most like. Did you fill the barrels?"

"Every one. They froze hard during the night, Pyp checked."

Grenn had changed a great deal from the big, clumsy, red-necked boy Jon had first befriended. He had grown half a foot, his chest and shoulders had thickened, and he had not cut his hair nor trimmed his beard since the Fist of the First Men. It made him look as huge and shaggy as an aurochs, the mocking name that Ser Alliser Thorne had hung on him during training. He looked weary now, though. When Jon said as much, he nodded. "I heard their axes all night. Couldn't sleep for all the chopping."

"Then go sleep now."

"I don't need—"

"You do. I want you rested. Go on, I'm not going to let you sleep through the fight." He made himself smile. "You're the only one who can move those bloody barrels."

Greenn went off muttering, and Jon returned to the far eye, searching the wildling camp. From time to time an arrow would sail past overhead, but he had learned to ignore those. The range was long and the angle was bad, the chances of being hit were small. He still saw no sign of Mance Rayder in the camp, but he spied Tormund Giantsbane and two of his sons around the turtle. The sons were struggling with the mammoth hide while Tormund gnawed on the roast leg of a goat and bellowed orders. Elsewhere he found the wildling skinchanger, Varamyr Sixskins, walking through the trees with his shadowcat dogging his heels.

When he heard the rattle of the winch chains and the iron groan of the cage door opening, he knew it would be Hobb bringing their breakfast as he did every morning. The sight of Mance's turtle had robbed Jon of his appetite. Their oil was all but gone, and the last barrel of pitch had been rolled off the Wall two nights ago. They would soon run short of arrows as well, and there were no fletchers making more. And the night before last, a raven had come from the west, from Ser Denys Mallister. Bowen Marsh had chased the wildlings all the way to the Shadow Tower, it seemed, and then farther, down into the gloom of the Gorge. At the Bridge of Skulls he had met the Weeper and three hundred wildlings and won a bloody battle. But the victory had been a costly one. More than a hundred brothers slain, among them Ser Endrew Tarth and Ser Aladale Wynch. The Old Pomegranate himself had been carried back to the Shadow Tower sorely wounded. Maester Mullin was tending him, but it would be some time before he was fit to return to Castle Black.

When he had read that, Jon had dispatched Zei to Mole's Town on their best horse to plead with the villagers to help man the Wall. She never returned. When he sent Mully after her, he came back to report the whole village deserted, even the brothel. Most likely Zei had followed them, straight down the kingsroad. *Maybe we should all do the same*, Jon reflected glumly.

He made himself eat, hungry or no. Bad enough he could not sleep, he could not go on without food as well. *Besides, this might be my last meal. It might be the last meal for all of us.* So it was that Jon had a belly full of bread, bacon, onions, and cheese when he heard Horse shout, "*IT'S COMING!*"

No one needed to ask what “it” was. Nor did Jon need the maester’s Myrish eye to see it creeping out from amongst the tents and trees. “It doesn’t really look much like a turtle,” Satin commented. “Turtles don’t have fur.”

“Most of them don’t have wheels either,” said Pyp.

“Sound the warhorn,” Jon commanded, and Kegs blew two long blasts, to wake Grenn and the other sleepers who’d had the watch during the night. If the wildlings were coming, the Wall would need every man. *Gods know, we have few enough.* Jon looked at Pyp and Kegs and Satin, Horse and Owen the Oaf, Tim Tangle tongue, Mully, Spare Boot, and the rest, and tried to imagine them going belly to belly and blade to blade against a hundred screaming wildlings in the freezing darkness of that tunnel, with only a few iron bars between them. That was what it would come down to, unless they could stop the turtle before the gate was breached.

“It’s big,” Horse said.

Pyp smacked his lips. “Think of all the soup it will make.” The jape was stillborn. Even Pyp sounded tired. *He looks half dead,* thought Jon, *but so do we all.* The King-beyond-the-Wall had so many men that he could throw fresh attackers at them every time, but the same handful of black brothers had to meet every assault, and it had worn them ragged.

The men beneath the wood and hides would be pulling hard, Jon knew, putting their shoulders into it, straining to keep the wheels turning, but once the turtle was flush against the gate they would exchange their ropes for axes. At least Mance was not sending his mammoths today. Jon was glad of that. Their awesome strength was wasted on the Wall, and their size only made them easy targets. The last had been a day and a half in the dying, its mournful trumpetings terrible to hear.

The turtle crept slowly through stones and stumps and brush. The earlier attacks had cost the free folk a hundred lives or more. Most still lay where they had fallen. In the lulls the crows would come and pay them court, but now the birds fled screeching. They liked the look of that turtle no more than he did.

Satin, Horse, and the others were looking to him, Jon knew, waiting for his orders. He was so tired, he hardly knew any more. *The Wall is mine,* he

reminded himself. “Owen, Horse, to the catapults. Kegs, you and Spare Boot on the scorpions. The rest of you string your bows. Fire arrows. Let’s see if we can burn it.” It was likely to be a futile gesture, Jon knew, but it had to be better than standing helpless.

Cumbersome and slow-moving, the turtle made for an easy shot, and his archers and crossbowmen soon turned it into a lumbering wooden hedgehog . . . but the wet hides protected it, just as they had the mantlets, and the flaming arrows guttered out almost as soon as they struck. Jon cursed under his breath. “Scorpions,” he commanded. “Catapults.”

The scorpions bolts punched deep into the pelts, but did no more damage than the fire arrows. The rocks went bouncing off the turtle’s roof, leaving dimples in the thick layers of hides. A stone from one of the trebuchets might have crushed it, but the one machine was still broken, and the wildlings had gone wide around the area where the other dropped its loads.

“Jon, it’s still coming,” said Owen the Oaf.

He could see that for himself. Inch by inch, yard by yard, the turtle crept closer, rolling, rumbling and rocking as it crossed the killing ground. Once the wildlings got it flush against the Wall, it would give them all the shelter they needed while their axes crashed through the hastily-repaired outer gates. Inside, under the ice, they would clear the loose rubble from the tunnel in a matter of hours, and then there would be nothing to stop them but two iron gates, a few half-frozen corpses, and whatever brothers Jon cared to throw in their path, to fight and die down in the dark.

To his left, the catapult made a *thunk* and filled the air with spinning stones. They plonked down on the turtle like hail, and caromed harmlessly aside. The wildling archers were still loosing arrows from behind their mantlets. One thudded into the face of a straw man, and Pyp said, “Four for Watt of Long Lake! We have a tie!” The next shaft whistled past his own ear, however. “*Fie!*” he shouted down. “I’m not in the tourney!”

“The hides won’t burn,” Jon said, as much to himself as to the others. Their only hope was to try and crush the turtle when it reached the Wall. For that, they needed boulders. No matter how stoutly built the turtle was, a huge chunk of rock crashing straight down on top of it from seven hundred feet was bound to do some damage. “Grenn, Owen, Kegs, it’s time.”

Alongside the warming shed a dozen stout oaken barrels were lined up in a row. They were full of crushed rock; the gravel that the black brothers customarily spread on the footpaths to give themselves better footing atop the Wall. Yesterday, after he'd seen the free folk covering the turtle with sheepskins, Jon told Grenn to pour water into the barrels, as much as they would take. The water would seep down through the crushed stone, and overnight the whole thing would freeze solid. It was the nearest thing to a boulder they were going to get.

"Why do we need to freeze it?" Grenn had asked him. "Why don't we just roll the barrels off the way they are?"

Jon answered, "If they crash against the Wall on the way down they'll burst, and loose gravel will spray everywhere. We don't want to rain pebbles on the whoresons."

He put his shoulder to the one barrel with Grenn, while Kegs and Owen were wrestling with another. Together they rocked it back and forth to break the grip of the ice that had formed around its bottom. "The bugger weighs a ton," said Grenn.

"Tip it over and roll it," Jon said. "Careful, if it rolls over your foot you'll end up like Spare Boot."

Once the barrel was on its side, Jon grabbed a torch and waved it above the surface of the Wall, back and forth, just enough to melt the ice a little. The thin film of water helped the barrel roll more easily. Too easily, in fact; they almost lost it. But finally, with four of them pooling their efforts, they rolled their boulder to the edge and stood it up again.

They had four of the big oak barrels lined up above the gate by the time Pyp shouted, "There's a turtle at our door!" Jon braced his injured leg and leaned out for a look. *Hoardings, Marsh should have built hoardings*. So many things they should have done. The wildlings were dragging the dead giants away from the gate. Horse and Mully were dropping rocks down on them, and Jon thought he saw one man go down, but the stones were too small to have any effect on the turtle itself. He wondered what the free folk would do about the dead mammoth in the path, but then he saw. The turtle was almost as wide as a longhall, so they simply pushed it *over* the carcass.

His leg twitched, but Horse caught his arm and drew him back to safety. “You shouldn’t lean out like that,” the boy said.

“We should have built hoardings.” Jon thought he could hear the crash of axes on wood, but that was probably just fear ringing in his ears. He looked to Grenn. “Do it.”

Grenn got behind a barrel, put his shoulder against it, grunted, and began to push. Owen and Mully moved to help him. They shoved the barrel out a foot, and then another. And suddenly it was gone.

They heard the *thump* as it struck the Wall on the way down, and then, much louder, the crash and *crack* of splintering wood, followed by shouts and screams. Satin whooped and Owen the Oaf danced in circles, while Pyp leaned out and called, “The turtle was stuffed full of rabbits! Look at them hop away!”

“*Again*,” Jon barked, and Grenn and Kegs slammed their shoulders against the next barrel, and sent it tottering out into empty air.

By the time they were done, the front of Mance’s turtle was a crushed and splintered ruin, and wildlings were spilling out the other end and scrambling for their camp. Satin scooped up his crossbow and sent a few quarrels after them as they ran, to see them off the faster. Grenn was grinning through his beard, Pyp was making japes, and none of them would die today.

*On the morrow, though . . .* Jon glanced toward the shed. Eight barrels of gravel remained where twelve had stood a few moments before. He realized how tired he was then, and how much his wound was hurting. *I need to sleep. A few hours, at least.* He could go to Maester Aemon for some dreamwine, that would help. “I am going down to the King’s Tower,” he told them. “Call me if Mance gets up to anything. Pyp, you have the Wall.”

“Me?” said Pyp.

“Him?” said Grenn.

Smiling, he left them to it and rode down in the cage.

A cup of dreamwine *did* help, as it happened. No sooner had he stretched out on the narrow bed in his cell than sleep took him. His dreams were strange and formless, full of strange voices, shouts and cries, and the sound



of a warhorn, blowing low and loud, a single deep booming note that lingered in the air.

When he awoke the sky was black outside the arrow slit that served him for a window, and four men he did not know were standing over him. One held a lantern. “Jon Snow,” the tallest of them said brusquely, “pull on your boots and come with us.”

His first groggy thought was that somehow the Wall had fallen whilst he slept, that Mance Rayder had sent more giants or another turtle and broken through the gate. But when he rubbed his eyes he saw that the strangers were all in black. *They’re men of the Night’s Watch*, Jon realized. “Come where? Who are you?”

The tall man gestured, and two of the others pulled Jon from the bed. With the lantern leading the way they marched him from his cell and up a half turn of stair, to the Old Bear’s solar. He saw Maester Aemon standing by the fire, his hands folded around the head of a blackthorn cane. Septon Cellador was half drunk as usual, and Ser Wynton Stout was asleep in a window seat. The other brothers were strangers to him. All but one.

Immaculate in his fur-trimmed cloak and polished boots, Ser Alliser Thorne turned to say, “Here’s the turncloak now, my lord. Ned Stark’s bastard, of Winterfell.”

“I’m no turncloak, Thorne,” Jon said coldly.

“We shall see.” In the leather chair behind the table where the Old Bear wrote his letters sat a big, broad, jowly man Jon did not know. “Yes, we shall see,” he said again. “You will not deny that you are Jon Snow, I hope? Stark’s bastard?”

“*Lord* Snow, he likes to call himself.” Ser Alliser was a spare, slim man, compact and sinewy, and just now his flinty eyes were dark with amusement.

“You’re the one who named me Lord Snow,” said Jon. Ser Alliser had been fond of naming the boys he trained, during his time as Castle Black’s master-at-arms. The Old Bear had sent Thorne to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. *These others must be Eastwatch men. The bird reached Cotter Pyke and he’s sent us help.* “How many men have you brought?” he asked the man behind the table.

“It’s me who’ll ask the questions,” the jowly man replied. “You’ve been charged with oathbreaking, cowardice, and desertion, Jon Snow. Do you deny that you abandoned your brothers to die on the Fist of the First Men and joined the wildling Mance Rayder, this self-styled King-beyond-the-Wall?”

“*Abandoned . . . ?*” Jon almost choked on the word.

Maester Aemon spoke up then. “My lord, Donal Noye and I discussed these issues when Jon Snow first returned to us, and were satisfied by Jon’s explanations.”

“Well, *I* am not satisfied, Maester,” said the jowly man. “I will hear these *explanations* for myself. Yes I will!”

Jon swallowed his anger. “I abandoned no one. I left the Fist with Qhorin Halfhand to scout the Skirling Pass. I joined the wildlings under orders. The Halfhand feared that Mance might have found the Horn of Winter . . .”

“The Horn of Winter?” Ser Alliser chuckled. “Were you commanded to count their snarks as well, Lord Snow?”

“No, but I counted their *giants* as best I could.”

“*Ser*,” snapped the jowly man. “You will address Ser Alliser as *ser*, and myself as *m’lord*. I am Janos Slynt, Lord of Harrenhal, and commander here at Castle Black until such time as Bowen Marsh returns with his garrison. You will grant us our courtesies, yes. I will not suffer to hear an anointed knight like the good Ser Alliser mocked by a traitor’s bastard.” He raised a hand and pointed a meaty finger at Jon’s face. “Do you deny that you took a wildling woman into your bed?”

“No.” Jon’s grief over Ygritte was too fresh for him to deny her now. “No, my lord.”

“I suppose it was also the Halfhand who commanded you to fuck this unwashed whore?” Ser Alliser asked with a smirk.

“*Ser*. She was no whore, *ser*. The Halfhand told me not to balk, whatever the wildlings asked of me, but . . . I will not deny that I went beyond what I had to do, that I . . . cared for her.”

“You admit to being an oathbreaker, then,” said Janos Slynt.

Half the men at Castle Black visited Mole's Town from time to time to dig for buried treasures in the brothel, Jon knew, but he would not dishonor Ygritte by equating her with the Mole's Town whores. "I broke my vows with a woman. I admit that. Yes."

"Yes, *m'lord!*" When Slynt scowled, his jowls quivered. He was as broad as the Old Bear had been, and no doubt would be as bald if he lived to Mormont's age. Half his hair was gone already, though he could not have been more than forty.

"Yes, my lord," Jon said. "I rode with the wildlings and ate with them, as the Halfhand commanded me, and I shared my furs with Ygritte. But I swear to you, I never turned my cloak. I escaped the Magnar as soon as I could, and never took up arms against my brothers or the realm."

Lord Slynt's small eyes studied him. "Ser Glendon," he commanded, "bring in the other prisoner."

Ser Glendon was the tall man who had dragged Jon from his bed. Four other men went with him when he left the room, but they were back soon enough with a captive, a small, sallow, battered man fettered hand and foot. He had a single eyebrow, a widow's peak, and a mustache that looked like a smear of dirt on his upper lip, but his face was swollen and mottled with bruises, and most of his front teeth had been knocked out.

The Eastwatch men threw the captive roughly to the floor. Lord Slynt frowned down at him. "Is this the one you spoke of?"

The captive blinked yellow eyes. "Aye." Not until that instant did Jon recognize Rattleshirt. *He is a different man without his armor*, he thought. "Aye," the wildling repeated, "he's the craven killed the Halfhand. Up in the Frostfangs, it were, after we hunted down t'other crows and killed them, every one. We would have done for this one too, only he begged f' his worthless life, offered t' join us if we'd have him. The Halfhand swore he'd see the craven dead first, but the wolf ripped Qhorin half t' pieces and this one opened his throat." He gave Jon a cracktooth smile then, and spat blood on his foot.

"Well?" Janos Slynt demanded of Jon harshly. "Do you deny it? Or will you claim Qhorin commanded you to kill him?"

“He told me . . .” The words came hard. “He told me to do *whatever* they asked of me.”

Slynt looked about the solar, at the other Eastwatch men. “Does this boy think I fell off a turnip wagon onto my head?”

“Your lies won’t save you now, Lord Snow,” warned Ser Alliser Thorne. “We’ll have the truth from you, bastard.”

“I’ve told you the truth. Our garrons were failing, and Rattleshirt was close behind us. Qhorin told me to pretend to join the wildlings. ‘*You must not balk, whatever is asked of you,*’ he said. He knew they would make me kill him. Rattleshirt was going to kill him anyway, he knew that too.”

“So now you claim the great Qhorin Halfhand feared *this* creature?” Slynt looked at Rattleshirt, and snorted.

“All men fear the Lord o’ Bones,” the wildling grumbled. Ser Glendon kicked him, and he lapsed back into silence.

“I never said that,” Jon insisted.

Slynt slammed a fist on the table. “I heard you! Ser Alliser had your measure true enough, it seems. You lie through your bastard’s teeth. Well, I will not suffer it. I will not! You might have fooled this crippled *blacksmith*, but not Janos Slynt! Oh, no. Janos Slynt does not swallow lies so easily. Did you think my skull was stuffed with cabbage?”

“I don’t know what your skull is stuffed with. My lord.”

“Lord Snow is nothing if not arrogant,” said Ser Alliser. “He murdered Qhorin just as his fellow turncloaks did Lord Mormont. It would not surprise me to learn that it was all part of the same fell plot. Benjen Stark may well have a hand in all this as well. For all we know, he is sitting in Mance Rayder’s tent even now. You know these Starks, my lord.”

“I do,” said Janos Slynt. “I know them too well.”

Jon peeled off his glove and showed them his burned hand. “I burned my hand defending Lord Mormont from a wight. And my uncle was a man of honor. He would never have betrayed his vows.”

“No more than you?” mocked Ser Alliser.

Septon Cellador cleared his throat. “Lord Slynt,” he said, “this boy refused to swear his vows properly in the sept, but went beyond the Wall to say his words before a heart tree. His father’s gods, he said, but they are wildling gods as well.”

“They are the gods of the north, Septon.” Maester Aemon was courteous, but firm. “My lords, when Donal Noye was slain, it was this young man Jon Snow who took the Wall and held it, against all the fury of the north. He has proved himself valiant, loyal, and resourceful. Were it not for him, you would have found Mance Rayder sitting here when you arrived, Lord Slynt. You are doing him a great wrong. Jon Snow was Lord Mormont’s own steward and squire. He was chosen for that duty because the Lord Commander saw much promise in him. As do I.”

“Promise?” said Slynt. “Well, promise may turn false. Qhorin Halfhand’s blood is on his hands. Mormont trusted him, you say, but what of that? I know what it is to be betrayed by men you trusted. Oh, yes. And I know the ways of wolves as well.” He pointed at Jon’s face. “Your father died a traitor.”

“My father was murdered.” Jon was past caring what they did to him, but he would not suffer any more lies about his father.

Slynt purpled. “Murder? You insolent pup. King Robert was not even cold when Lord Eddard moved against his son.” He rose to his feet; a shorter man than Mormont, but thick about the chest and arms, with a gut to match. A small gold spear tipped with red enamel pinned his cloak at the shoulder. “Your father died by the sword, but he was highborn, a King’s Hand. For you, a noose will serve. Ser Alliser, take this turncloak to an ice cell.”

“My lord is wise.” Ser Alliser seized Jon by the arm.

Jon yanked away and grabbed the knight by the throat with such ferocity that he lifted him off the floor. He would have throttled him if the Eastwatch men had not pulled him off. Thorne staggered back, rubbing the marks Jon’s fingers had left on his neck. “You see for yourselves, brothers. The boy is a wildling.”