

JON

Jon was showing Dareon how best to deliver a sidestroke when the new recruit entered the practice yard. “Your feet should be farther apart,” he urged. “You don’t want to lose your balance. That’s good. Now pivot as you deliver the stroke, get all your weight behind the blade.”

Dareon broke off and lifted his visor. “Seven gods,” he murmured. “Would you look at this, Jon.”

Jon turned. Through the eye slit of his helm, he beheld the fattest boy he had ever seen standing in the door of the armory. By the look of him, he must have weighed twenty stone. The fur collar of his embroidered surcoat was lost beneath his chins. Pale eyes moved nervously in a great round moon of a face, and plump sweaty fingers wiped themselves on the velvet of his doublet. “They... they told me I was to come here for... for training,” he said to no one in particular.

“A lordling,” Pyp observed to Jon. “Southron, most like near Highgarden.” Pyp had traveled the Seven Kingdoms with a mummers’ troupe, and bragged that he could tell what you were and where you’d been born just from the sound of your voice.

A striding huntsman had been worked in scarlet thread upon the breast of the fat boy’s fur-trimmed surcoat. Jon did not recognize the sigil. Ser Alliser Thorne looked over his new charge and said, “It would seem they have run short of poachers and thieves down south. Now they send us pigs to man the Wall. Is fur and velvet your notion of armor, my Lord of Ham?”

It was soon revealed that the new recruit had brought his own armor with him; padded doublet, boiled leather, mail and plate and helm, even a great wood-and-leather shield blazoned with the same striding huntsman he wore on his surcoat. As none of it was black, however, Ser Alliser insisted that he reequip himself from the armory. That took half the morning. His girth required Donal Noye to take apart a mail hauberk and refit it with leather panels at the sides. To get a helm over his head the armorer had to

detach the visor. His leathers bound so tightly around his legs and under his arms that he could scarcely move. Dressed for battle, the new boy looked like an overcooked sausage about to burst its skin. "Let us hope you are not as inept as you look," Ser Alliser said. "Halder, see what Ser Piggy can do."

Jon Snow winced. Halder had been born in a quarry and apprenticed as a stonemason. He was sixteen, tall and muscular, and his blows were as hard as any Jon had ever felt. "This will be uglier than a whore's ass," Pyp muttered, and it was.

The fight lasted less than a minute before the fat boy was on the ground, his whole body shaking as blood leaked through his shattered helm and between his pudgy fingers. "I yield," he shrilled. "No more, I yield, don't hit me." Rast and some of the other boys were laughing.

Even then, Ser Alliser would not call an end. "On your feet, Ser Piggy," he called. "Pick up your sword." When the boy continued to cling to the ground, Thorne gestured to Halder. "Hit him with the flat of your blade until he finds his feet." Halder delivered a tentative smack to his foe's upraised cheeks. "You can hit harder than that," Thorne taunted. Halder took hold of his longsword with both hands and brought it down so hard the blow split leather, even on the flat. The new boy screeched in pain.

Jon Snow took a step forward. Pyp laid a mailed hand on his arm. "Jon, *no*," the small boy whispered with an anxious glance at Ser Alliser Thorne.

"On your feet," Thorne repeated. The fat boy struggled to rise, slipped, and fell heavily again. "Ser Piggy is starting to grasp the notion," Ser Alliser observed. "Again."

Halder lifted the sword for another blow. "Cut us off a ham!" Rast urged, laughing.

Jon shook off Pyp's hand. "Halder, *enough*."

Halder looked to Ser Alliser.

"The Bastard speaks and the peasants tremble," the master-at-arms said in that sharp, cold voice of his. "I remind you that I am the master-at-arms here, Lord Snow."

“Look at him, Halder,” Jon urged, ignoring Thorne as best he could. “There’s no honor in beating a fallen foe. He yielded.” He knelt beside the fat boy.

Halder lowered his sword. “He yielded,” he echoed.

Ser Alliser’s onyx eyes were fixed on Jon Snow. “It would seem our Bastard is in love,” he said as Jon helped the fat boy to his feet. “Show me your steel, Lord Snow.”

Jon drew his longsword. He dared defy Ser Alliser only to a point, and he feared he was well beyond it now.

Thorne smiled. “The Bastard wishes to defend his lady love, so we shall make an exercise of it. Rat, Pimple, help our Stone Head here.” Rast and Albett moved to join Halder. “Three of you ought to be sufficient to make Lady Piggy squeal. All you need do is get past the Bastard.”

“Stay behind me,” Jon said to the fat boy. Ser Alliser had often sent two foes against him, but never three. He knew he would likely go to sleep bruised and bloody tonight. He braced himself for the assault.

Suddenly Pyp was beside him. “Three to two will make for better sport,” the small boy said cheerfully. He dropped his visor and slid out his sword. Before Jon could even think to protest, Grenn had stepped up to make a third.

The yard had grown deathly quiet. Jon could feel Ser Alliser’s eyes. “Why are you waiting?” he asked Rast and the others in a voice gone deceptively soft, but it was Jon who moved first. Halder barely got his sword up in time.

Jon drove him backward, attacking with every blow, keeping the older boy on the heels. *Know your foe*, Ser Rodrik had taught him once; Jon knew Halder, brutally strong but short of patience, with no taste for defense. Frustrate him, and he would leave himself open, as certain as sunset.

The clang of steel echoed through the yard as the others joined battle around him. Jon blocked a savage cut at his head, the shock of impact running up his arm as the swords crashed together. He slammed a sidestroke into Halder’s ribs, and was rewarded with a muffled grunt of pain. The

counterstroke caught Jon on the shoulder. Chainmail crunched, and pain flared up his neck, but for an instant Halder was unbalanced. Jon cut his left leg from under him, and he fell with a curse and a crash.

Grenn was standing his ground as Jon had taught him, giving Albett more than he cared for, but Pyp was hard-pressed. Rast had two years and forty pounds on him. Jon stepped up behind him and rang the raper's helm like a bell. As Rast went reeling, Pyp slid in under his guard, knocked him down, and leveled a blade at his throat. By then Jon had moved on. Facing two swords, Albett backed away. "I yield," he shouted.

Ser Alliser Thorne surveyed the scene with disgust. "The mummer's farce has gone on long enough for today." He walked away. The session was at an end.

Dareon helped Halder to his feet. The quarryman's son wrenched off his helm and threw it across the yard. "For an instant, I thought I finally had you, Snow."

"For an instant, you did," Jon replied. Under his mail and leather, his shoulder was throbbing. He sheathed his sword and tried to remove his helm, but when he raised his arm, the pain made him grit his teeth.

"Let me," a voice said. Thick-fingered hands unfastened helm from gorget and lifted it off gently. "Did he hurt you?"

"I've been bruised before." He touched his shoulder and winced. The yard was emptying around them.

Blood matted the fat boy's hair where Halder had split his helm asunder. "My name is Samwell Tarly, of Horn..." He stopped and licked his lips. "I mean, I *was* of Horn Hill, until I... left. I've come to take the black. My father is Lord Randyll, a bannerman to the Tyrells of Highgarden. I used to be his heir, only..." His voice trailed off.

"I'm Jon Snow, Ned Stark's bastard, of Winterfell."

Samwell Tarly nodded. "I... if you want, you can call me Sam. My mother calls me Sam."

"You can call *him* Lord Snow," Pyp said as he came up to join them. "You don't want to know what his mother calls him."

“These two are Grenn and Pypar,” Jon said.

“Grenn’s the ugly one,” Pyp said.

Grenn scowled. “You’re uglier than me. At least I don’t have ears like a bat.”

“My thanks to all of you,” the fat boy said gravely.

“Why didn’t you get up and fight?” Grenn demanded.

“I wanted to, truly. I just... I couldn’t. I didn’t want him to hit me anymore.” He looked at the ground. “I... I fear I’m a coward. My lord father always said so.”

Grenn looked thunderstruck. Even Pyp had no words to say to that, and Pyp had words for everything. What sort of man would proclaim himself a coward?

Samwell Tarly must have read their thoughts on their faces. His eyes met Jon’s and darted away, quick as frightened animals. “I... I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t mean to... to be like I am.” He walked heavily toward the armory.

Jon called after him. “You were hurt,” he said. “Tomorrow you’ll do better.”

Sam looked mournfully back over one shoulder. “No I won’t,” he said, blinking back tears. “I never do better.”

When he was gone, Grenn frowned. “Nobody likes cravens,” he said uncomfortably. “I wish we hadn’t helped him. What if they think we’re craven too?”

“You’re too stupid to be craven,” Pyp told him.

“I am not,” Grenn said.

“Yes you are. If a bear attacked you in the woods, you’d be too stupid to run away.”

“I would not,” Grenn insisted. “I’d run away faster than you.” He stopped suddenly, scowling when he saw Pyp’s grin and realized what he’d just said. His thick neck flushed a dark red. Jon left them there arguing as

he returned to the armory, hung up his sword, and stripped off his battered armor.

Life at Castle Black followed certain patterns; the mornings were for swordplay, the afternoons for work. The black brothers set new recruits to many different tasks, to learn where their skills lay. Jon cherished the rare afternoons when he was sent out with Ghost ranging at his side to bring back game for the Lord Commander's table, but for every day spent hunting, he gave a dozen to Donal Noye in the armory, spinning the whetstone while the one-armed smith sharpened axes grown dull from use, or pumping the bellows as Noye hammered out a new sword. Other times he ran messages, stood at guard, mucked out stables, fletched arrows, assisted Maester Aemon with his birds or Bowen Marsh with his counts and inventories.

That afternoon, the watch commander sent him to the winch cage with four barrels of fresh-crushed stone, to scatter gravel over the icy footpaths atop the Wall. It was lonely and boring work, even with Ghost along for company, but Jon found he did not mind. On a clear day you could see half the world from the top of the Wall, and the air was always cold and bracing. He could think here, and he found himself thinking of Samwell Tarly... and, oddly, of Tyrion Lannister. He wondered what Tyrion would have made of the fat boy. *Most men would rather deny a hard truth than face it*, the dwarf had told him, grinning. The world was full of cravens who pretended to be heroes; it took a queer sort of courage to admit to cowardice as Samwell Tarly had.

His sore shoulder made the work go slowly. It was late afternoon before Jon finished graveling the paths. He lingered on high to watch the sun go down, turning the western sky the color of blood. Finally, as dusk was settling over the north, Jon rolled the empty barrels back into the cage and signaled the winch men to lower him.

The evening meal was almost done by the time he and Ghost reached the common hall. A group of the black brothers were dicing over mulled wine near the fire. His friends were at the bench nearest the west wall, laughing. Pyp was in the middle of a story. The mummer's boy with the big

ears was a born liar with a hundred different voices, and he did not tell his tales so much as live them, playing all the parts as needed, a king one moment and a swineherd the next. When he turned into an alehouse girl or a virgin princess, he used a high falsetto voice that reduced them all to tears of helpless laughter, and his eunuchs were always eerily accurate caricatures of Ser Alliser. Jon took as much pleasure from Pyp's antics as anyone... yet that night he turned away and went instead to the end of the bench, where Samwell Tarly sat alone, as far from the others as he could get.

He was finishing the last of the pork pie the cooks had served up for supper when Jon sat down across from him. The fat boy's eyes widened at the sight of Ghost. "Is that a wolf?"

"A direwolf," Jon said. "His name is Ghost. The direwolf is the sigil of my father's House."

"Ours is a striding huntsman," Samwell Tarly said.

"Do you like to hunt?"

The fat boy shuddered. "I hate it." He looked as though he was going to cry again.

"What's wrong now?" Jon asked him. "Why are you always so frightened?"

Sam stared at the last of his pork pie and gave a feeble shake of his head, too scared even to talk. A burst of laughter filled the hall. Jon heard Pyp squeaking in a high voice. He stood. "Let's go outside."

The round fat face looked up at him, suspicious. "Why? What will we do outside?"

"Talk," Jon said. "Have you seen the Wall?"

"I'm fat, not blind," Samwell Tarly said. "Of course I saw it, it's seven hundred feet high." Yet he stood up all the same, wrapped a fur-lined cloak over his shoulders, and followed Jon from the common hall, still wary, as if he suspected some cruel trick was waiting for him in the night. Ghost padded along beside them. "I never thought it would be like this," Sam said as they walked, his words steaming in the cold air. Already he was huffing

and puffing as he tried to keep up. “All the buildings are falling down, and it’s so... so...”

“Cold?” A hard frost was settling over the castle, and Jon could hear the soft crunch of grey weeds beneath his boots.

Sam nodded miserably. “I hate the cold,” he said. “Last night I woke up in the dark and the fire had gone out and I was certain I was going to freeze to death by morning.”

“It must have been warmer where you come from.”

“I never saw snow until last month. We were crossing the barrowlands, me and the men my father sent to see me north, and this white stuff began to fall, like a soft rain. At first I thought it was so beautiful, like feathers drifting from the sky, but it kept on and on, until I was frozen to the bone. The men had crusts of snow in their beards and more on their shoulders, and still it kept coming. I was afraid it would never end.”

Jon smiled.

The Wall loomed before them, glimmering palely in the light of the half moon. In the sky above, the stars burned clear and sharp. “Are they going to make me go up there?” Sam asked. His face curdled like old milk as he looked at the great wooden stairs. “I’ll die if I have to climb that.”

“There’s a winch,” Jon said, pointing. “They can draw you up in a cage.”

Samwell Tarly sniffled. “I don’t like high places.”

It was too much. Jon frowned, incredulous. “Are you afraid of *everything*?” he asked. “I don’t understand. If you are truly so craven, why are you here? Why would a coward want to join the Night’s Watch?”

Samwell Tarly looked at him for a long moment, and his round face seemed to cave in on itself. He sat down on the frost-covered ground and began to cry, huge choking sobs that made his whole body shake. Jon Snow could only stand and watch. Like the snowfall on the barrowlands, it seemed the tears would never end.

It was Ghost who knew what to do. Silent as shadow, the pale direwolf moved closer and began to lick the warm tears off Samwell Tarly’s face.

The fat boy cried out, startled... and somehow, in a heartbeat, his sobs turned to laughter.

Jon Snow laughed with him. Afterward they sat on the frozen ground, huddled in their cloaks with Ghost between them. Jon told the story of how he and Robb had found the pups newborn in the late summer snows. It seemed a thousand years ago now. Before long he found himself talking of Winterfell.

“Sometimes I dream about it,” he said. “I’m walking down this long empty hall. My voice echoes all around, but no one answers, so I walk faster, opening doors, shouting names. I don’t even know who I’m looking for. Most nights it’s my father, but sometimes it’s Robb instead, or my little sister Arya, or my uncle.” The thought of Benjen Stark saddened him; his uncle was still missing. The Old Bear had sent out rangers in search of him. Ser Jaremy Rykker had led two sweeps, and Quorin Halfhand had gone forth from the Shadow Tower, but they’d found nothing aside from a few blazes in the trees that his uncle had left to mark his way. In the stony highlands to the northwest, the marks stopped abruptly and all trace of Ben Stark vanished.

“Do you ever find anyone in your dream?” Sam asked.

Jon shook his head. “No one. The castle is always empty.” He had never told anyone of the dream, and he did not understand why he was telling Sam now, yet somehow it felt good to talk of it. “Even the ravens are gone from the rookery, and the stables are full of bones. That always scares me. I start to run then, throwing open doors, climbing the tower three steps at a time, screaming for someone, for anyone. And then I find myself in front of the door to the crypts. It’s black inside, and I can see the steps spiraling down. Somehow I know I have to go down there, but I don’t want to. I’m afraid of what might be waiting for me. The old Kings of Winter are down there, sitting on their thrones with stone wolves at their feet and iron swords across their laps, but it’s not them I’m afraid of. I scream that I’m not a Stark, that this isn’t my place, but it’s no good, I have to go anyway, so I start down, feeling the walls as I descend, with no torch to light the way. It gets darker and darker, until I want to scream.” He stopped,

frowning, embarrassed. “That’s when I always wake.” His skin cold and clammy, shivering in the darkness of his cell. Ghost would leap up beside him, his warmth as comforting as daybreak. He would go back to sleep with his face pressed into the direwolf’s shaggy white fur. “Do you dream of Horn Hill?” Jon asked.

“No.” Sam’s mouth grew tight and hard. “I hated it there.” He scratched Ghost behind the ear, brooding, and Jon let the silence breathe. After a long while Samwell Tarly began to talk, and Jon Snow listened quietly, and learned how it was that a self-confessed coward found himself on the Wall.

The Tarlys were a family old in honor, bannermen to Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden and Warden of the South. The eldest son of Lord Randyll Tarly, Samwell was born heir to rich lands, a strong keep, and a storied two-handed greatsword named Heartsbane, forged of Valyrian steel and passed down from father to son near five hundred years.

Whatever pride his lord father might have felt at Samwell’s birth vanished as the boy grew up plump, soft, and awkward. Sam loved to listen to music and make his own songs, to wear soft velvets, to play in the castle kitchen beside the cooks, drinking in the rich smells as he snatched lemon cakes and blueberry tarts. His passions were books and kittens and dancing, clumsy as he was. But he grew ill at the sight of blood, and wept to see even a chicken slaughtered. A dozen masters-at-arms came and went at Horn Hill, trying to turn Samwell into the knight his father wanted. The boy was cursed and caned, slapped and starved. One man had him sleep in his chainmail to make him more martial. Another dressed him in his mother’s clothing and paraded him through the bailey to shame him into valor. He only grew fatter and more frightened, until Lord Randyll’s disappointment turned to anger and then to loathing. “One time,” Sam confided, his voice dropping from a whisper, “two men came to the castle, warlocks from Qarth with white skin and blue lips. They slaughtered a bull aurochs and made me bathe in the hot blood, but it didn’t make me brave as they’d promised. I got sick and retched. Father had them scourged.”

Finally, after three girls in as many years, Lady Tarly gave her lord husband a second son. From that day, Lord Randyll ignored Sam, devoting all his time to the younger boy, a fierce, robust child more to his liking. Samwell had known several years of sweet peace with his music and his books.

Until the dawn of his fifteenth name day, when he had been awakened to find his horse saddled and ready. Three men-at-arms had escorted him into a wood near Horn Hill, where his father was skinning a deer. “You are almost a man grown now, and my heir,” Lord Randyll Tarly had told his eldest son, his long knife laying bare the carcass as he spoke. “You have given me no cause to disown you, but neither will I allow you to inherit the land and title that should be Dickon’s. Heartsbane must go to a man strong enough to wield her, and you are not worthy to touch her hilt. So I have decided that you shall this day announce that you wish to take the black. You will forsake all claim to your brother’s inheritance and start north before evenfall.

“If you do not, then on the morrow we shall have a hunt, and somewhere in these woods your horse will stumble, and you will be thrown from the saddle to die... or so I will tell your mother. She has a woman’s heart and finds it in her to cherish even you, and I have no wish to cause her pain. Please do not imagine that it will truly be that easy, should you think to defy me. Nothing would please me more than to hunt you down like the pig you are.” His arms were red to the elbow as he laid the skinning knife aside. “So. There is your choice. The Night’s Watch”—he reached inside the deer, ripped out its heart, and held it in his fist, red and dripping—“or this.”

Sam told the tale in a calm, dead voice, as if it were something that had happened to someone else, not to him. And strangely, Jon thought, he did not weep, not even once. When he was done, they sat together and listened to the wind for a time. There was no other sound in all the world.

Finally Jon said, “We should go back to the common hall.”

“Why?” Sam asked.

Jon shrugged. “There’s hot cider to drink, or mulled wine if you prefer. Some nights Dareon sings for us, if the mood is on him. He was a singer, before... well, not truly, but almost, an apprentice singer.”

“How did he come here?” Sam asked.

“Lord Rowan of Goldengrove found him in bed with his daughter. The girl was two years older, and Dareon swears she helped him through her window, but under her father’s eye she named it rape, so here he is. When Maester Aemon heard him sing, he said his voice was honey poured over thunder.” Jon smiled. “Toad sometimes sings too, if you call it singing. Drinking songs he learned in his father’s winesink. Pyp says his voice is piss poured over a fart.” They laughed at that together.

“I should like to hear them both,” Sam admitted, “but they would not want me there.” His face was troubled. “He’s going to make me fight again on the morrow, isn’t he?”

“He is,” Jon was forced to say.

Sam got awkwardly to his feet. “I had better try to sleep.” He huddled down in his cloak and plodded off.

The others were still in the common room when Jon returned, alone but for Ghost. “Where have *you* been?” Pyp asked.

“Talking with Sam,” he said.

“He truly is craven,” said Grenn. “At supper, there were still places on the bench when he got his pie, but he was too scared to come sit with us.”

“The Lord of Ham thinks he’s too good to eat with the likes of us,” suggested Jeren.

“I saw him eat a pork pie,” Toad said, smirking. “Do you think it was a brother?” He began to make *oinking* noises.

“*Stop it!*” Jon snapped angrily.

The other boys fell silent, taken aback by his sudden fury. “Listen to me,” Jon said into the quiet, and he told them how it was going to be. Pyp backed him, as he’d known he would, but when Halder spoke up, it was a pleasant surprise. Grenn was anxious at the first, but Jon knew the words to move him. One by one the rest fell in line. Jon persuaded some, cajoled

some, shamed the others, made threats where threats were required. At the end they had all agreed... all but Rast.

"You girls do as you please," Rast said, "but if Thorne sends me against Lady Piggy, I'm going to slice me off a rasher of bacon." He laughed in Jon's face and left them there.

Hours later, as the castle slept, three of them paid a call on his cell. Grenn held his arms while Pyp sat on his legs. Jon could hear Rast's rapid breathing as Ghost leapt onto his chest. The direwolf's eyes burned red as embers as his teeth nipped lightly at the soft skin of the boy's throat, just enough to draw blood. "Remember, we know where you sleep," Jon said softly.

The next morning Jon heard Rast tell Albett and Toad how his razor had slipped while he shaved.

From that day forth, neither Rast nor any of the others would hurt Samwell Tarly. When Ser Alliser matched them against him, they would stand their ground and swat aside his slow, clumsy strokes. If the master-at-arms screamed for an attack, they would dance in and tap Sam lightly on breastplate or helm or leg. Ser Alliser raged and threatened and called them all cravens and women and worse, yet Sam remained unhurt. A few nights later, at Jon's urging, he joined them for the evening meal, taking a place on the bench beside Halder. It was another fortnight before he found the nerve to join their talk, but in time he was laughing at Pyp's faces and teasing Grenn with the best of them.

Fat and awkward and frightened he might be, but Samwell Tarly was no fool. One night he visited Jon in his cell. "I don't know what you did," he said, "but I know you did it." He looked away shyly. "I've never had a friend before."

"We're not friends," Jon said. He put a hand on Sam's broad shoulder. "We're brothers."

And so they were, he thought to himself after Sam had taken his leave. Robb and Bran and Rickon were his father's sons, and he loved them still, yet Jon knew that he had never truly been one of them. Catelyn Stark had seen to that. The grey walls of Winterfell might still haunt his dreams, but

Castle Black was his life now, and his brothers were Sam and Grenn and Halder and Pyp and the other cast-outs who wore the black of the Night's Watch.

“My uncle spoke truly,” he whispered to Ghost. He wondered if he would ever see Benjen Stark again, to tell him.