

JON

The courtyard rang to the song of swords.

Under black wool, boiled leather, and mail, sweat trickled icily down Jon's chest as he pressed the attack. Grenn stumbled backward, defending himself clumsily. When he raised his sword, Jon went underneath it with a sweeping blow that crunched against the back of the other boy's leg and sent him staggering. Grenn's downcut was answered by an overhand that dented his helm. When he tried a sideswing, Jon swept aside his blade and slammed a mailed forearm into his chest. Grenn lost his footing and sat down hard in the snow. Jon knocked his sword from his fingers with a slash to his wrist that brought a cry of pain.

"Enough!" Ser Alliser Thorne had a voice with an edge like Valyrian steel.

Grenn cradled his hand. "The bastard broke my wrist."

"The bastard hamstringed you, opened your empty skull, and cut off your hand. Or would have, if these blades had an edge. It's fortunate for you that the Watch needs stableboys as well as rangers." Ser Alliser gestured at Jeren and Toad. "Get the Aurochs on his feet, he has funeral arrangements to make."

Jon took off his helm as the other boys were pulling Grenn to his feet. The frosty morning air felt good on his face. He leaned on his sword, drew a deep breath, and allowed himself a moment to savor the victory.

"That is a longsword, not an old man's cane," Ser Alliser said sharply. "Are your legs hurting, Lord Snow?"

Jon hated that name, a mockery that Ser Alliser had hung on him the first day he came to practice. The boys had picked it up, and now he heard it everywhere. He slid the longsword back into its scabbard. "No," he replied.

Thorne strode toward him, crisp black leathers whispering faintly as he moved. He was a compact man of fifty years, spare and hard, with grey in

his black hair and eyes like chips of onyx. “The truth now,” he commanded.

“I’m tired,” Jon admitted. His arm burned from the weight of the longsword, and he was starting to feel his bruises now that the fight was done.

“What you are is weak.”

“I won.”

“No. The Aurochs lost.”

One of the other boys sniggered. Jon knew better than to reply. He had beaten everyone that Ser Alliser had sent against him, yet it gained him nothing. The master-at-arms served up only derision. Thorne hated him, Jon had decided; of course, he hated the other boys even worse.

“That will be all,” Thorne told them. “I can only stomach so much ineptitude in any one day. If the Others ever come for us, I pray they have archers, because you lot are fit for nothing more than arrow fodder.”

Jon followed the rest back to the armory, walking alone. He often walked alone here. There were almost twenty in the group he trained with, yet not one he could call a friend. Most were two or three years his senior, yet not one was half the fighter Robb had been at fourteen. Dareon was quick but afraid of being hit. Pyp used his sword like a dagger, Jereen was weak as a girl, Grenn slow and clumsy. Halder’s blows were brutally hard but he ran right into your attacks. The more time he spent with them, the more Jon despised them.

Inside, Jon hung sword and scabbard from a hook in the stone wall, ignoring the others around him. Methodically, he began to strip off his mail, leather, and sweat-soaked woolens. Chunks of coal burned in iron braziers at either end of the long room, but Jon found himself shivering. The chill was always with him here. In a few years he would forget what it felt like to be warm.

The weariness came on him suddenly, as he donned the roughspun blacks that were their everyday wear. He sat on a bench, his fingers fumbling with the fastenings on his cloak. *So cold*, he thought, remembering the warm halls of Winterfell, where the hot waters ran

through the walls like blood through a man's body. There was scant warmth to be found in Castle Black; the walls were cold here, and the people colder.

No one had told him the Night's Watch would be like this; no one except Tyrion Lannister. The dwarf had given him the truth on the road north, but by then it had been too late. Jon wondered if his father had known what the Wall would be like. He must have, he thought; that only made it hurt the worse.

Even his uncle had abandoned him in this cold place at the end of the world. Up here, the genial Benjen Stark he had known became a different person. He was First Ranger, and he spent his days and nights with Lord Commander Mormont and Maester Aemon and the other high officers, while Jon was given over to the less than tender charge of Ser Alliser Thorne.

Three days after their arrival, Jon had heard that Benjen Stark was to lead a half-dozen men on a ranging into the haunted forest. That night he sought out his uncle in the great timbered common hall and pleaded to go with him. Benjen refused him curtly. "This is not Winterfell," he told him as he cut his meat with fork and dagger. "On the Wall, a man gets only what he earns. You're no ranger, Jon, only a green boy with the smell of summer still on you."

Stupidly, Jon argued. "I'll be fifteen on my name day," he said. "Almost a man grown."

Benjen Stark frowned. "A boy you are, and a boy you'll remain until Ser Alliser says you are fit to be a man of the Night's Watch. If you thought your Stark blood would win you easy favors, you were wrong. We put aside our old families when we swear our vows. Your father will always have a place in my heart, but *these* are my brothers now." He gestured with his dagger at the men around them, all the hard cold men in black.

Jon rose at dawn the next day to watch his uncle leave. One of his rangers, a big ugly man, sang a bawdy song as he saddled his garron, his breath steaming in the cold morning air. Ben Stark smiled at that, but he had no smile for his nephew. "How often must I tell you no, Jon? We'll speak when I return."

As he watched his uncle lead his horse into the tunnel, Jon had remembered the things that Tyrion Lannister told him on the kingsroad, and in his mind's eye he saw Ben Stark lying dead, his blood red on the snow. The thought made him sick. What was he becoming?

Afterward he sought out Ghost in the loneliness of his cell, and buried his face in his thick white fur.

If he must be alone, he would make solitude his armor. Castle Black had no godswood, only a small sept and a drunken septon, but Jon could not find it in him to pray to any gods, old or new. If they were real, he thought, they were as cruel and implacable as winter.

He missed his true brothers: little Rickon, bright eyes shining as he begged for a sweet; Robb, his rival and best friend and constant companion; Bran, stubborn and curious, always wanting to follow and join in whatever Jon and Robb were doing. He missed the girls too, even Sansa, who never called him anything but “my half brother” since she was old enough to understand what *bastard* meant. And Arya... he missed her even more than Robb, skinny little thing that she was, all scraped knees and tangled hair and torn clothes, so fierce and willful. Arya never seemed to fit, no more than he had... yet she could always make Jon smile. He would give anything to be with her now, to muss up her hair once more and watch her make a face, to hear her finish a sentence with him.

“You broke my wrist, bastard boy.”

Jon lifted his eyes at the sullen voice. Grenn loomed over him, thick of neck and red of face, with three of his friends behind him. He knew Todder, a short ugly boy with an unpleasant voice. The recruits all called him Toad. The other two were the ones Yoren had brought north with them, Jon remembered, rapers taken down in the Fingers. He'd forgotten their names. He hardly ever spoke to them, if he could help it. They were brutes and bullies, without a thimble of honor between them.

Jon stood up. “I'll break the other one for you if you ask nicely.” Grenn was sixteen and a head taller than Jon. All four of them were bigger than he was, but they did not scare him. He'd beaten every one of them in the yard.

“Maybe we'll break you,” one of the rapers said.

“Try.” Jon reached back for his sword, but one of them grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

“You make us look bad,” complained Toad.

“You looked bad before I ever met you,” Jon told him. The boy who had his arm jerked upward on him, hard. Pain lanced through him, but Jon would not cry out.

Toad stepped close. “The little lordling has a mouth on him,” he said. He had pig eyes, small and shiny. “Is that your mommy’s mouth, bastard? What was she, some whore? Tell us her name. Maybe I had her a time or two.” He laughed.

Jon twisted like an eel and slammed a heel down across the instep of the boy holding him. There was a sudden cry of pain, and he was free. He flew at Toad, knocked him backward over a bench, and landed on his chest with both hands on his throat, slamming his head against the packed earth.

The two from the Fingers pulled him off, throwing him roughly to the ground. Grenn began to kick at him. Jon was rolling away from the blows when a booming voice cut through the gloom of the armory. “STOP THIS! *NOW!*”

Jon pulled himself to his feet. Donal Noye stood glowering at them. “The yard is for fighting,” the armorer said. “Keep your quarrels out of my armory, or I’ll make them my quarrels. You won’t like that.”

Toad sat on the floor, gingerly feeling the back of his head. His fingers came away bloody. “He tried to kill me.”

“’S true. I saw it,” one of the rapers put in.

“He broke my wrist,” Grenn said again, holding it out to Noye for inspection.

The armorer gave the offered wrist the briefest of glances. “A bruise. Perhaps a sprain. Maester Aemon will give you a salve. Go with him, Todder, that head wants looking after. The rest of you, return to your cells. Not you, Snow. You stay.”

Jon sat heavily on the long wooden bench as the others left, oblivious to the looks they gave him, the silent promises of future retribution. His arm

was throbbing.

“The Watch has need of every man it can get,” Donal Noye said when they were alone. “Even men like Toad. You won’t win any honors killing him.”

Jon’s anger flared. “He said my mother was—”

“—a whore. I heard him. What of it?”

“Lord Eddard Stark was not a man to sleep with whores,” Jon said icily. “His honor—”

“—did not prevent him from fathering a bastard. Did it?”

Jon was cold with rage. “Can I go?”

“You go when I tell you to go.”

Jon stared sullenly at the smoke rising from the brazier, until Noye took him under the chin, thick fingers twisting his head around. “Look at me when I’m talking to you, boy.”

Jon looked. The armorer had a chest like a keg of ale and a gut to match. His nose was flat and broad, and he always seemed in need of a shave. The left sleeve of his black wool tunic was fastened at the shoulder with a silver pin in the shape of a longsword. “Words won’t make your mother a whore. She was what she was, and nothing Toad says can change that. You know, we have men on the Wall whose mothers *were* whores.”

Not my mother, Jon thought stubbornly. He knew nothing of his mother; Eddard Stark would not talk of her. Yet he dreamed of her at times, so often that he could almost see her face. In his dreams, she was beautiful, and highborn, and her eyes were kind.

“You think you had it hard, being a high lord’s bastard?” the armorer went on. “That boy Jeren is a septon’s get, and Cotter Pyke is the baseborn son of a tavern wench. Now he commands Eastwatch by the Sea.”

“I don’t care,” Jon said. “I don’t care about them and I don’t care about you or Thorne or Benjen Stark or any of it. I hate it here. It’s too... it’s cold.”

“Yes. Cold and hard and mean, that’s the Wall, and the men who walk it. Not like the stories your wet nurse told you. Well, piss on the stories and piss on your wet nurse. This is the way it is, and you’re here for life, same as the rest of us.”

“Life,” Jon repeated bitterly. The armorer could talk about life. He’d had one. He’d only taken the black after he’d lost an arm at the siege of Storm’s End. Before that he’d smithed for Stannis Baratheon, the king’s brother. He’d seen the Seven Kingdoms from one end to the other; he’d feasted and wenched and fought in a hundred battles. They said it was Donal Noye who’d forged King Robert’s warhammer, the one that crushed the life from Rhaegar Targaryen on the Trident. He’d done all the things that Jon would never do, and then when he was old, well past thirty, he’d taken a glancing blow from an axe and the wound had festered until the whole arm had to come off. Only then, crippled, had Donal Noye come to the Wall, when his life was all but over.

“Yes, life,” Noye said. “A long life or a short one, it’s up to you, Snow. The road you’re walking, one of your brothers will slit your throat for you one night.”

“They’re not my brothers,” Jon snapped. “They hate me because I’m better than they are.”

“No. They hate you because you act like you’re better than they are. They look at you and see a castle-bred bastard who thinks he’s a lordling.” The armorer leaned close. “You’re no lordling. Remember that. You’re a Snow, not a Stark. You’re a bastard and a bully.”

“A *bully*?” Jon almost choked on the word. The accusation was so unjust it took his breath away. “They were the ones who came after me. Four of them.”

“Four that you’ve humiliated in the yard. Four who are probably afraid of you. I’ve watched you fight. It’s not training with you. Put a good edge on your sword, and they’d be dead meat; you know it, I know it, they know it. You leave them nothing. You shame them. Does that make you proud?”

Jon hesitated. He did feel proud when he won. Why shouldn’t he? But the armorer was taking that away too, making it sound as if he were doing

something wrong. “They’re all older than me,” he said defensively.

“Older and bigger and stronger, that’s the truth. I’ll wager your master-at-arms taught you how to fight bigger men at Winterfell, though. Who was he, some old knight?”

“Ser Rodrik Cassel,” Jon said warily. There was a trap here. He felt it closing around him.

Donal Noye leaned forward, into Jon’s face. “Now think on this, boy. None of these others have ever had a master-at-arms until Ser Alliser. Their fathers were farmers and wagonmen and poachers, smiths and miners and oars on a trading galley. What they know of fighting they learned between decks, in the alleys of Oldtown and Lannisport, in wayside brothels and taverns on the kingsroad. They may have clacked a few sticks together before they came here, but I promise you, not one in twenty was ever rich enough to own a real sword.” His look was grim. “So how do you like the taste of your victories now, Lord Snow?”

“Don’t call me that!” Jon said sharply, but the force had gone out of his anger. Suddenly he felt ashamed and guilty. “I never... I didn’t think...”

“Best you start thinking,” Noye warned him. “That, or sleep with a dagger by your bed. Now go.”

By the time Jon left the armory, it was almost midday. The sun had broken through the clouds. He turned his back on it and lifted his eyes to the Wall, blazing blue and crystalline in the sunlight. Even after all these weeks, the sight of it still gave him the shivers. Centuries of windblown dirt had pocked and scoured it, covering it like a film, and it often seemed a pale grey, the color of an overcast sky... but when the sun caught it fair on a bright day, it *shone*, alive with light, a colossal blue-white cliff that filled up half the sky.

The largest structure ever built by the hands of man, Benjen Stark had told Jon on the kingsroad when they had first caught sight of the Wall in the distance. “And beyond a doubt the most useless,” Tyrion Lannister had added with a grin, but even the Imp grew silent as they rode closer. You could see it from miles off, a pale blue line across the northern horizon,

stretching away to the east and west and vanishing in the far distance, immense and unbroken. *This is the end of the world*, it seemed to say.

When they finally spied Castle Black, its timbered keeps and stone towers looked like nothing more than a handful of toy blocks scattered on the snow, beneath the vast wall of ice. The ancient stronghold of the black brothers was no Winterfell, no true castle at all. Lacking walls, it could not be defended, not from the south, or east, or west; but it was only the north that concerned the Night's Watch, and to the north loomed the Wall. Almost seven hundred feet high it stood, three times the height of the tallest tower in the stronghold it sheltered. His uncle said the top was wide enough for a dozen armored knights to ride abreast. The gaunt outlines of huge catapults and monstrous wooden cranes stood sentry up there, like the skeletons of great birds, and among them walked men in black as small as ants.

As he stood outside the armory looking up, Jon felt almost as overwhelmed as he had that day on the kingsroad, when he'd seen it for the first time. The Wall was like that. Sometimes he could almost forget that it was there, the way you forgot about the sky or the earth underfoot, but there were other times when it seemed as if there was nothing else in the world. It was older than the Seven Kingdoms, and when he stood beneath it and looked up, it made Jon dizzy. He could feel the great weight of all that ice pressing down on him, as if it were about to topple, and somehow Jon knew that if it fell, the world fell with it.

"Makes you wonder what lies beyond," a familiar voice said.

Jon looked around. "Lannister. I didn't see—I mean, I thought I was alone."

Tyryon Lannister was bundled in furs so thickly he looked like a very small bear. "There's much to be said for taking people unawares. You never know what you might learn."

"You won't learn anything from me," Jon told him. He had seen little of the dwarf since their journey ended. As the queen's own brother, Tyryon Lannister had been an honored guest of the Night's Watch. The Lord Commander had given him rooms in the King's Tower—so-called, though no king had visited it for a hundred years—and Lannister dined at

Mormont's own table and spent his days riding the Wall and his nights dicing and drinking with Ser Alliser and Bowen Marsh and the other high officers.

"Oh, I learn things everywhere I go." The little man gestured up at the Wall with a gnarled black walking stick. "As I was saying... why is it that when one man builds a wall, the next man immediately needs to know what's on the other side?" He cocked his head and looked at Jon with his curious mismatched eyes. "You *do* want to know what's on the other side, don't you?"

"It's nothing special," Jon said. He wanted to ride with Benjen Stark on his rangings, deep into the mysteries of the haunted forest, wanted to fight Mance Rayder's wildlings and ward the realm against the Others, but it was better not to speak of the things you wanted. "The rangers say it's just woods and mountains and frozen lakes, with lots of snow and ice."

"And the grumkins and the snarks," Tyrion said. "Let us not forget them, Lord Snow, or else what's that big thing for?"

"Don't call me Lord Snow."

The dwarf lifted an eyebrow. "Would you rather be called the Imp? Let them see that their words can cut you, and you'll never be free of the mockery. If they want to give you a name, take it, make it your own. Then they can't hurt you with it anymore." He gestured with his stick. "Come, walk with me. They'll be serving some vile stew in the common hall by now, and I could do with a bowl of something hot."

Jon was hungry too, so he fell in beside Lannister and slowed his pace to match the dwarf's awkward, waddling steps. The wind was rising, and they could hear the old wooden buildings creaking around them, and in the distance a heavy shutter banging, over and over, forgotten. Once there was a muffled *thump* as a blanket of snow slid from a roof and landed near them.

"I don't see your wolf," Lannister said as they walked.

"I chain him up in the old stables when we're training. They board all the horses in the east stables now, so no one bothers him. The rest of the time he stays with me. My sleeping cell is in Hardin's Tower."

“That’s the one with the broken battlement, no? Shattered stone in the yard below, and a lean to it like our noble king Robert after a long night’s drinking? I thought all those buildings had been abandoned.”

Jon shrugged. “No one cares where you sleep. Most of the old keeps are empty, you can pick any cell you want.” Once Castle Black had housed five thousand fighting men with all their horses and servants and weapons. Now it was home to a tenth that number, and parts of it were falling into ruin.

Tyrion Lannister’s laughter steamed in the cold air. “I’ll be sure to tell your father to arrest more stonemasons, before your tower collapses.”

Jon could taste the mockery there, but there was no denying the truth. The Watch had built nineteen great strongholds along the Wall, but only three were still occupied: Eastwatch on its grey windswept shore, the Shadow Tower hard by the mountains where the Wall ended, and Castle Black between them, at the end of the kingsroad. The other keeps, long deserted, were lonely, haunted places, where cold winds whistled through black windows and the spirits of the dead manned the parapets.

“It’s better that I’m by myself,” Jon said stubbornly. “The rest of them are scared of Ghost.”

“Wise boys,” Lannister said. Then he changed the subject. “The talk is, your uncle is too long away.”

Jon remembered the wish he’d wished in his anger, the vision of Benjen Stark dead in the snow, and he looked away quickly. The dwarf had a way of sensing things, and Jon did not want him to see the guilt in his eyes. “He said he’d be back by my name day,” he admitted. His name day had come and gone, unremarked, a fortnight past. “They were looking for Ser Waymar Royce, his father is bannerman to Lord Arryn. Uncle Benjen said they might search as far as the Shadow Tower. That’s all the way up in the mountains.”

“I hear that a good many rangers have vanished of late,” Lannister said as they mounted the steps to the common hall. He grinned and pulled open the door. “Perhaps the grumkins are hungry this year.”

Inside, the hall was immense and drafty, even with a fire roaring in its great hearth. Crows nested in the timbers of its lofty ceiling. Jon heard their cries overhead as he accepted a bowl of stew and a heel of black bread from the day's cooks. Grenn and Toad and some of the others were seated at the bench nearest the warmth, laughing and cursing each other in rough voices. Jon eyed them thoughtfully for a moment. Then he chose a spot at the far end of the hall, well away from the other diners.

Tyrian Lannister sat across from him, sniffing at the stew suspiciously. "Barley, onion, carrot," he muttered. "Someone should tell the cooks that turnip isn't a meat."

"It's mutton stew." Jon pulled off his gloves and warmed his hands in the steam rising from the bowl. The smell made his mouth water.

"Snow."

Jon knew Alliser Thorne's voice, but there was a curious note in it that he had not heard before. He turned.

"The Lord Commander wants to see you. Now."

For a moment Jon was too frightened to move. Why would the Lord Commander want to see him? They had heard something about Benjen, he thought wildly, he was dead, the vision had come true. "Is it my uncle?" he blurted. "Is he returned safe?"

"The Lord Commander is not accustomed to waiting," was Ser Alliser's reply. "And I am not accustomed to having my commands questioned by bastards."

Tyrian Lannister swung off the bench and rose. "Stop it, Thorne. You're frightening the boy."

"Keep out of matters that don't concern you, Lannister. You have no place here."

"I have a place at court, though," the dwarf said, smiling. "A word in the right ear, and you'll die a sour old man before you get another boy to train. Now tell Snow why the Old Bear needs to see him. Is there news of his uncle?"

“No,” Ser Alliser said. “This is another matter entirely. A bird arrived this morning from Winterfell, with a message that concerns his brother.” He corrected himself. “His half brother.”

“Bran,” Jon breathed, scrambling to his feet. “Something’s happened to Bran.”

Tyrian Lannister laid a hand on his arm. “Jon,” he said. “I am truly sorry.”

Jon scarcely heard him. He brushed off Tyrian’s hand and strode across the hall. He was running by the time he hit the doors. He raced to the Commander’s Keep, dashing through drifts of old snow. When the guards passed him, he took the tower steps two at a time. By the time he burst into the presence of the Lord Commander, his boots were soaked and Jon was wild-eyed and panting. “Bran,” he said. “What does it say about Bran?”

Jeor Mormont, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, was a gruff old man with an immense bald head and a shaggy grey beard. He had a raven on his arm, and he was feeding it kernels of corn. “I am told you can read.” He shook the raven off, and it flapped its wings and flew to the window, where it sat watching as Mormont drew a roll of paper from his belt and handed it to Jon. “*Corn*,” it muttered in a raucous voice. “*Corn, corn.*”

Jon’s finger traced the outline of the direwolf in the white wax of the broken seat. He recognized Robb’s hand, but the letters seemed to blur and run as he tried to read them. He realized he was crying. And then, through the tears, he found the sense in the words, and raised his head. “He woke up,” he said. “The gods gave him back.”

“Crippled,” Mormont said. “I’m sorry, boy. Read the rest of the letter.”

He looked at the words, but they didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. Bran was going to live. “My brother is going to live,” he told Mormont. The Lord Commander shook his head, gathered up a fistful of corn, and whistled. The raven flew to his shoulder, crying, “*Live! Live!*”

Jon ran down the stairs, a smile on his face and Robb’s letter in his hand. “My brother is going to live,” he told the guards. They exchanged a look. He ran back to the common hall, where he found Tyrian Lannister just

finishing his meal. He grabbed the little man under the arms, hoisted him up in the air, and spun him around in a circle. "*Bran is going to live!*" he whooped. Lannister looked startled. Jon put him down and thrust the paper into his hands. "Here, read it," he said.

Others were gathering around and looking at him curiously. Jon noticed Grenn a few feet away. A thick woolen bandage was wrapped around one hand. He looked anxious and uncomfortable, not menacing at all. Jon went to him. Grenn edged backward and put up his hands. "Stay away from me now, you bastard."

Jon smiled at him. "I'm sorry about your wrist. Robb used the same move on me once, only with a wooden blade. It hurt like seven hells, but yours must be worse. Look, if you want, I can show you how to defend that."

Alliser Thorne overheard him. "Lord Snow wants to take my place now." He sneered. "I'd have an easier time teaching a wolf to juggle than you will training this aurochs."

"I'll take that wager, Ser Alliser," Jon said. "I'd love to see Ghost juggle."

Jon heard Grenn suck in his breath, shocked. Silence fell.

Then Tyrion Lannister guffawed. Three of the black brothers joined in from a nearby table. The laughter spread up and down the benches, until even the cooks joined in. The birds stirred in the rafters, and finally even Grenn began to chuckle.

Ser Alliser never took his eyes from Jon. As the laughter rolled around him, his face darkened, and his sword hand curled into a fist. "That was a grievous error, Lord Snow," he said at last in the acid tones of an enemy.