

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.