

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.