

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, Jeren 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?