

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. Maestor 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 Joren 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