

Jon shrugged. "There's hot cider to drink, or mulled wine if you prefer. Some nights Dareon sings for us, if the mood is on him. He was a singer, before... well, not truly, but almost, an apprentice singer."

"How did he come here?" Sam asked.

"Lord Rowan of Goldengrove found him in bed with his daughter. The girl was two years older, and Dareon swears she helped him through her window, but under her father's eye she named it rape, so here he is. When Maester Aemon heard him sing, he said his voice was honey poured over thunder." Jon smiled. "Toad sometimes sings too, if you call it singing. Drinking songs he learned in his father's winesink. Pyp says his voice is piss poured over a fart." They laughed at that together.

"I should like to hear them both," Sam admitted, "but they would not want me there." His face was troubled. "He's going to make me fight again on the morrow, isn't he?"

"He is," Jon was forced to say.

Sam got awkwardly to his feet. "I had better try to sleep." He huddled down in his cloak and plodded off.

The others were still in the common room when Jon returned, alone but for Ghost. "Where have you been?" Pyp asked.

"Talking with Sam," he said.

"He truly is craven," said Grenn. "At supper, there were still places on the bench when he got his pie, but he was too scared to come sit with us."

"The Lord of Ham thinks he's too good to eat with the likes of us," suggested Jeren.

"I saw him eat a pork pie," Toad said, smirking. "Do you think it was a brother?" He began to make oinking noises.

"Stop it!" Jon snapped angrily.

The other boys fell silent, taken aback by his sudden fury. "Listen to me," Jon said into the quiet, and he told them how it was going to be. Pyp backed him, as he'd known he would, but when Halder spoke up, it was a pleasant surprise. Grenn was anxious at the first, but Jon knew the words to move him. One by one the rest fell in line. Jon persuaded some, cajoled some, shamed the others, made threats where threats were required. At the end they had all agreed... all but Rast.

"You girls do as you please," Rast said, "but if Thorne sends me against Lady Piggy, I'm going to slice me off a rasher of bacon." He laughed in Jon's face and left them there.

Hours later, as the castle slept, three of them paid a call on his cell. Grenn held his arms while Pyp sat on his legs. Jon could hear Rast's rapid breathing as Ghost leapt onto his chest. The direwolf's eyes burned red as embers as his teeth nipped lightly at the soft skin of the boy's throat, just enough to draw blood. "Remember, we know where you sleep," Jon said softly.

The next morning Jon heard Rast tell Albett and Toad how his razor had slipped while he shaved.

From that day forth, neither Rast nor any of the others would hurt Samwell Tarly. When Ser Alliser matched them against him, they would stand their ground and swat aside his slow,