

## JON

The courtyard rang to the song of swords.

Under black wool, boiled leather, and mail, sweat trickled icily down Jon's chest as he pressed the attack. Grenn stumbled backward, defending himself clumsily. When he raised his sword, Jon went underneath it with a sweeping blow that crunched against the back of the other boy's leg and sent him staggering. Grenn's downcut was answered by an overhand that dented his helm. When he tried a sideswing, Jon swept aside his blade and slammed a mailed forearm into his chest. Grenn lost his footing and sat down hard in the snow. Jon knocked his sword from his fingers with a slash to his wrist that brought a cry of pain.

"Enough!" Ser Alliser Thorne had a voice with an edge like Valyrian steel.

Grenn cradled his hand. "The bastard broke my wrist."

"The bastard hamstrung you, opened your empty skull, and cut off your hand. Or would have, if these blades had an edge. It's fortunate for you that the Watch needs stableboys as well as rangers." Ser Alliser gestured at Jeren and Toad. "Get the Aurochs on his feet, he has funeral arrangements to make."

Jon took off his helm as the other boys were pulling Grenn to his feet. The frosty morning air felt good on his face. He leaned on his sword, drew a deep breath, and allowed himself a moment to savor the victory.

"That is a longsword, not an old man's cane," Ser Alliser said sharply. "Are your legs hurting, Lord Snow?"

Jon hated that name, a mockery that Ser Alliser had hung on him the first day he came to practice. The boys had picked it up, and now he heard it everywhere. He slid the longsword back into its scabbard. "No," he replied.

Thorne strode toward him, crisp black leathers whispering faintly as he moved. He was a compact man of fifty years, spare and hard, with grey in his black hair and eyes like chips of onyx. "The truth now," he commanded.

"I'm tired," Jon admitted. His arm burned from the weight of the longsword, and he was starting to feel his bruises now that the fight was done.

"What you are is weak."

"I won."

"No. The Aurochs lost."

One of the other boys sniggered. Jon knew better than to reply. He had beaten everyone that Ser Alliser had sent against him, yet it gained him nothing. The master-at-arms served up only derision. Thorne hated him, Jon had decided; of course, he hated the other boys even worse.

"That will be all," Thorne told them. "I can only stomach so much ineptitude in any one day. If the Others ever come for us, I pray they have archers, because you lot are fit for nothing more than arrow fodder."

Jon followed the rest back to the armory, walking alone. He often walked alone here. There were almost twenty in the group he trained with, yet not one he could call a friend. Most were