

Afterward he sought out Ghost in the loneliness of his cell, and buried his face in his thick white fur.

If he must be alone, he would make solitude his armor. Castle Black had no godswood, only a small sept and a drunken septon, but Jon could not find it in him to pray to any gods, old or new. If they were real, he thought, they were as cruel and implacable as winter.

He missed his true brothers: little Rickon, bright eyes shining as he begged for a sweet; Robb, his rival and best friend and constant companion; Bran, stubborn and curious, always wanting to follow and join in whatever Jon and Robb were doing. He missed the girls too, even Sansa, who never called him anything but “my half brother” since she was old enough to understand what bastard meant. And Arya... he missed her even more than Robb, skinny little thing that she was, all scraped knees and tangled hair and torn clothes, so fierce and willful. Arya never seemed to fit, no more than he had... yet she could always make Jon smile. He would give anything to be with her now, to muss up her hair once more and watch her make a face, to hear her finish a sentence with him.

“You broke my wrist, bastard boy.”

Jon lifted his eyes at the sullen voice. Grenn loomed over him, thick of neck and red of face, with three of his friends behind him. He knew Todder, a short ugly boy with an unpleasant voice. The recruits all called him Toad. The other two were the ones Yoren had brought north with them, Jon remembered, rapers taken down in the Fingers. He’d forgotten their names. He hardly ever spoke to them, if he could help it. They were brutes and bullies, without a thimble of honor between them.

Jon stood up. “I’ll break the other one for you if you ask nicely.” Grenn was sixteen and a head taller than Jon. All four of them were bigger than he was, but they did not scare him. He’d beaten every one of them in the yard.

“Maybe we’ll break you,” one of the rapers said.

“Try.” Jon reached back for his sword, but one of them grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

“You make us look bad,” complained Toad.

“You looked bad before I ever met you,” Jon told him. The boy who had his arm jerked upward on him, hard. Pain lanced through him, but Jon would not cry out.

Toad stepped close. “The little lordling has a mouth on him,” he said. He had pig eyes, small and shiny. “Is that your mommy’s mouth, bastard? What was she, some whore? Tell us her name. Maybe I had her a time or two.” He laughed.

Jon twisted like an eel and slammed a heel down across the instep of the boy holding him. There was a sudden cry of pain, and he was free. He flew at Toad, knocked him backward over a bench, and landed on his chest with both hands on his throat, slamming his head against the packed earth.

The two from the Fingers pulled him off, throwing him roughly to the ground. Grenn began to kick at him. Jon was rolling away from the blows when a booming voice cut through the gloom of the armory. “STOP THIS! NOW!”