

## JON

You are as hopeless as any boys I have ever trained,” Ser Alliser Thorne announced when they had all assembled in the yard. “Your hands were made for manure shovels, not for swords, and if it were up to me, the lot of you would be set to herding swine. But last night I was told that Gueren is marching five new boys up the kingsroad. One or two may even be worth the price of piss. To make room for them, I have decided to pass eight of you on to the Lord Commander to do with as he will.” He called out the names one by one. “Toad. Stone Head. Aurochs. Lover. Pimple. Monkey. Ser Loon.” Last, he looked at Jon. “And the Bastard.”

Pyp let fly a whoop and thrust his sword into the air. Ser Alliser fixed him with a reptile stare. “They will call you men of Night’s Watch now, but you are bigger fools than the Mummer’s Monkey here if you believe that. You are boys still, green and stinking of summer, and when the winter comes you will die like flies.” And with that, Ser Alliser Thorne took his leave of them.

The other boys gathered round the eight who had been named, laughing and cursing and offering congratulations. Halder smacked Toad on the butt with the flat of his sword and shouted, “Toad, of the Night’s Watch!” Yelling that a black brother needed a horse, Pyp leapt onto Grenn’s shoulders, and they tumbled to the ground, rolling and punching and hooting. Dareon dashed inside the armory and returned with a skin of sour red. As they passed the wine from hand to hand, grinning like fools, Jon noticed Samwell Tarly standing by himself beneath a bare dead tree in the corner of the yard. Jon offered him the skin. “A swallow of wine?”

Sam shook his head. “No thank you, Jon.”

“Are you well?”

“Very well, truly,” the fat boy lied. “I am so happy for you all.” His round face quivered as he forced a smile. “You will be First Ranger someday, just as your uncle was.”

“Is,” Jon corrected. He would not accept that Benjen Stark was dead. Before he could say more, Halder cried, “Here, you planning to drink that all yourself?” Pyp snatched the skin from his hand and danced away, laughing. While Grenn seized his arm, Pyp gave the skin a squeeze, and a thin stream of red squirted Jon in the face. Halder howled in protest at the waste of good wine. Jon sputtered and struggled. Matthar and Jeren climbed the wall and began pelting them all with snowballs.

By the time he wrenched free, with snow in his hair and wine stains on his surcoat, Samwell Tarly had gone.

That night, Three-Finger Hobb cooked the boys a special meal to mark the occasion. When Jon arrived at the common hall, the Lord Steward himself led him to the bench near the fire. The older men clapped him on the arm in passing. The eight soon-to-be brothers feasted on rack of lamb baked in a crust of garlic and herbs, garnished with sprigs of mint, and surrounded by mashed yellow turnips swimming in butter. “From the Lord Commander’s own table,” Bowen Marsh told them. There were salads of spinach and chickpeas and turnip greens, and afterward bowls of iced blueberries and sweet cream.

“Do you think they’ll keep us together?” Pyp wondered as they gorged themselves happily.