

## JON

Jon was showing Dareon how best to deliver a sidestroke when the new recruit entered the practice yard. “Your feet should be farther apart,” he urged. “You don’t want to lose your balance. That’s good. Now pivot as you deliver the stroke, get all your weight behind the blade.”

Dareon broke off and lifted his visor. “Seven gods,” he murmured. “Would you look at this, Jon.”

Jon turned. Through the eye slit of his helm, he beheld the fattest boy he had ever seen standing in the door of the armory. By the look of him, he must have weighed twenty stone. The fur collar of his embroidered surcoat was lost beneath his chins. Pale eyes moved nervously in a great round moon of a face, and plump sweaty fingers wiped themselves on the velvet of his doublet. “They... they told me I was to come here for... for training,” he said to no one in particular.

“A lordling,” Pyp observed to Jon. “Southron, most like near Highgarden.” Pyp had traveled the Seven Kingdoms with a mummers’ troupe, and bragged that he could tell what you were and where you’d been born just from the sound of your voice.

A striding huntsman had been worked in scarlet thread upon the breast of the fat boy’s fur-trimmed surcoat. Jon did not recognize the sigil. Ser Alliser Thorne looked over his new charge and said, “It would seem they have run short of poachers and thieves down south.

Now they send us pigs to man the Wall. Is fur and velvet your notion of armor, my Lord of Ham?”

It was soon revealed that the new recruit had brought his own armor with him; padded doublet, boiled leather, mail and plate and helm, even a great wood-and-leather shield blazoned with the same striding huntsman he wore on his surcoat. As none of it was black, however, Ser Alliser insisted that he reequip himself from the armory. That took half the morning. His girth required Donal Noye to take apart a mail hauberk and refit it with leather panels at the sides. To get a helm over his head the armorer had to detach the visor. His leathers bound so tightly around his legs and under his arms that he could scarcely move. Dressed for battle, the new boy looked like an overcooked sausage about to burst its skin. “Let us hope you are not as inept as you look,” Ser Alliser said. “Halder, see what Ser Piggy can do.”

Jon Snow winced. Halder had been born in a quarry and apprenticed as a stonemason. He was sixteen, tall and muscular, and his blows were as hard as any Jon had ever felt. “This will be uglier than a whore’s ass,” Pyp muttered, and it was.

The fight lasted less than a minute before the fat boy was on the ground, his whole body shaking as blood leaked through his shattered helm and between his pudgy fingers. “I yield,” he shrilled. “No more, I yield, don’t hit me.” Rast and some of the other boys were laughing.

Even then, Ser Alliser would not call an end. “On your feet, Ser Piggy,” he called. “Pick up your sword.” When the boy continued to cling to the ground, Thorne gestured to Halder. “Hit him with the flat of your blade until he finds his feet.” Halder delivered a tentative smack to his foe’s upraised cheeks. “You can hit harder than that,” Thorne taunted. Halder took hold of his