

## TYRION

“Are you certain that you must leave us so soon?” the Lord Commander asked him.

“Past certain, Lord Mormont,” Tyrion replied. “My brother Jaime will be wondering what has become of me. He may decide that you have convinced me to take the black.”

“Would that I could.” Mormont picked up a crab claw and cracked it in his fist. Old as he was, the Lord Commander still had the strength of a bear. “You’re a cunning man, Tyrion. We have need of men of your sort on the Wall.”

Tyrion grinned. “Then I shall scour the Seven Kingdoms for dwarfs and ship them all to you, Lord Mormont.” As they laughed, he sucked the meat from a crab leg and reached for another. The crabs had arrived from Eastwatch only this morning, packed in a barrel of snow, and they were succulent.

Ser Alliser Thorne was the only man at table who did not so much as crack a smile. “Lannister mocks us.”

“Only you, Ser Alliser,” Tyrion said. This time the laughter round the table had a nervous, uncertain quality to it.

Thorne’s black eyes fixed on Tyrion with loathing. “You have a bold tongue for someone who is less than half a man. Perhaps you and I should visit the yard together.”

“Why?” asked Tyrion. “The crabs are here.”

The remark brought more guffaws from the others. Ser Alliser stood up, his mouth a tight line. “Come and make your japes with steel in your hand.”

Tyrion looked pointedly at his right hand. “Why, I *have* steel in my hand, Ser Alliser, although it appears to be a crab fork. Shall we duel?” He hopped up on his chair and began poking at Thorne’s chest with the tiny fork. Roars of laughter filled the tower room. Bits of crab flew from the

Lord Commander's mouth as he began to gasp and choke. Even his raven joined in, cawing loudly from above the window. "*Duel! Duel! Duel!*"

Ser Alliser Thorne walked from the room so stiffly it looked as though he had a dagger up his butt.

Mormont was still gasping for breath. Tyrion pounded him on the back. "To the victor goes the spoils," he called out. "I claim Thorne's share of the crabs."

Finally the Lord Commander recovered himself. "You are a wicked man, to provoke our Ser Alliser so," he scolded.

Tyrion seated himself and took a sip of wine. "If a man paints a target on his chest, he should expect that sooner or later someone will loose an arrow at him. I have seen dead men with more humor than your Ser Alliser."

"Not so," objected the Lord Steward, Bowen Marsh, a man as round and red as a pomegranate. "You ought to hear the droll names he gives the lads he trains."

Tyrion had heard a few of those droll names. "I'll wager the lads have a few names for him as well," he said. "Chip the ice off your eyes, my good lords. Ser Alliser Thorne should be mucking out your stables, not drilling your young warriors."

"The Watch has no shortage of stableboys," Lord Mormont grumbled. "That seems to be all they send us these days. Stableboys and sneak thieves and rapers. Ser Alliser is an anointed knight, one of the few to take the black since I have been Lord Commander. He fought bravely at King's Landing."

"On the wrong side," Ser Jaremy Rykker commented dryly. "I ought to know, I was there on the battlements beside him. Tywin Lannister gave us a splendid choice. Take the black, or see our heads on spikes before evenfall. No offense intended, Tyrion."

"None taken, Ser Jaremy. My father is very fond of spiked heads, especially those of people who have annoyed him in some fashion. And a face as noble as yours, well, no doubt he saw you decorating the city wall

above the King's Gate. I think you would have looked very striking up there."

"Thank you," Ser Jaremy replied with a sardonic smile.

Lord Commander Mormont cleared his throat. "Sometimes I fear Ser Alliser saw you true, Tyrion. You *do* mock us and our noble purpose here."

Tyrion shrugged. "We all need to be mocked from time to time, Lord Mormont, lest we start to take ourselves too seriously. More wine, please." He held out his cup.

As Rykker filled it for him, Bowen Marsh said, "You have a great thirst for a small man."

"Oh, I think that Lord Tyrion is quite a large man," Maester Aemon said from the far end of the table. He spoke softly, yet the high officers of the Night's Watch all fell quiet, the better to hear what the ancient had to say. "I think he is a giant come among us, here at the end of the world."

Tyrion answered gently, "I've been called many things, my lord, but *giant* is seldom one of them."

"Nonetheless," Maester Aemon said as his clouded, milk-white eyes moved to Tyrion's face, "I think it is true."

For once, Tyrion Lannister found himself at a loss for words. He could only bow his head politely and say, "You are too kind, Maester Aemon."

The blind man smiled. He was a tiny thing, wrinkled and hairless, shrunk beneath the weight of a hundred years so his maester's collar with its links of many metals hung loose about his throat. "I have been called many things, my lord," he said, "but *kind* is seldom one of them." This time Tyrion himself led the laughter.

Much later, when the serious business of eating was done and the others had left, Mormont offered Tyrion a chair beside the fire and a cup of mulled spirits so strong they brought tears to his eyes. "The kingsroad can be perilous this far north," the Lord Commander told him as they drank.

"I have Jyck and Morrec," Tyrion said, "and Yoren is riding south again."

“Yoren is only one man. The Watch shall escort you as far as Winterfell,” Mormont announced in a tone that brooked no argument. “Three men should be sufficient.”

“If you insist, my lord,” Tyrion said. “You might send young Snow. He would be glad for a chance to see his brothers.”

Mormont frowned through his thick grey beard. “Snow? Oh, the Stark bastard. I think not. The young ones need to forget the lives they left behind them, the brothers and mothers and all that. A visit home would only stir up feelings best left alone. I know these things. My own blood kin... my sister Maege rules Bear Island now, since my son’s dishonor. I have nieces I have never seen.” He took a swallow. “Besides, Jon Snow is only a boy. You shall have three strong swords, to keep you safe.”

“I am touched by your concern, Lord Mormont.” The strong drink was making Tyrion light-headed, but not so drunk that he did not realize that the Old Bear wanted something from him. “I hope I can repay your kindness.”

“You can,” Mormont said bluntly. “Your sister sits beside the king. Your brother is a great knight, and your father the most powerful lord in the Seven Kingdoms. Speak to them for us. Tell them of our need here. You have seen for yourself, my lord. The Night’s Watch is dying. Our strength is less than a thousand now. Six hundred here, two hundred in the Shadow Tower, even fewer at Eastwatch, and a scant third of those fighting men. The Wall is a hundred leagues long. Think on that. Should an attack come, I have three men to defend each mile of wall.”

“Three and a third,” Tyrion said with a yawn.

Mormont scarcely seemed to hear him. The old man warmed his hands before the fire. “I sent Benjen Stark to search after Yohn Royce’s son, lost on his first ranging. The Royce boy was green as summer grass, yet he insisted on the honor of his own command, saying it was his due as a knight. I did not wish to offend his lord father, so I yielded. I sent him out with two men I deemed as good as any in the Watch. More fool I.”

“*Fool*,” the raven agreed. Tyrion glanced up. The bird peered down at him with those beady black eyes, ruffling its wings. “*Fool*,” it called again.

Doubtless old Mormont would take it amiss if he throttled the creature. A pity.

The Lord Commander took no notice of the irritating bird. “Gared was near as old as I am and longer on the Wall,” he went on, “yet it would seem he forswore himself and fled. I should never have believed it, not of him, but Lord Eddard sent me his head from Winterfell. Of Royce, there is no word. One deserter and two men lost, and now Ben Stark too has gone missing.” He sighed deeply. “Who am I to send searching after *him*? In two years I will be seventy. Too old and too weary for the burden I bear, yet if I set it down, who will pick it up? Alliser Thorne? Bowen Marsh? I would have to be as blind as Maester Aemon not to see what *they* are. The Night’s Watch has become an army of sullen boys and tired old men. Apart from the men at my table tonight, I have perhaps twenty who can read, and even fewer who can think, or plan, or *lead*. Once the Watch spent its summers building, and each Lord Commander raised the Wall higher than he found it. Now it is all we can do to stay alive.”

He was in deadly earnest, Tyrion realized. He felt faintly embarrassed for the old man. Lord Mormont had spent a good part of his life on the Wall, and he needed to believe if those years were to have any meaning. “I promise, the king will hear of your need,” Tyrion said gravely, “and I will speak to my father and my brother Jaime as well.” And he would. Tyrion Lannister was as good as his word. He left the rest unsaid; that King Robert would ignore him, Lord Tywin would ask if he had taken leave of his senses, and Jaime would only laugh.

“You are a young man, Tyrion,” Mormont said. “How many winters have you seen?”

He shrugged. “Eight, nine. I misremember.”

“And all of them short.”

“As you say, my lord.” He had been born in the dead of winter, a terrible cruel one that the maesters said had lasted near three years, but Tyrion’s earliest memories were of spring.

“When I was a boy, it was said that a long summer always meant a long winter to come. This summer has lasted *nine years*, Tyrion, and a tenth will

soon be upon us. Think on that.”

“When *I* was a boy,” Tyrion replied, “my wet nurse told me that one day, if men were good, the gods would give the world a summer without ending. Perhaps we’ve been better than we thought, and the Great Summer is finally at hand.” He grinned.

The Lord Commander did not seem amused. “You are not fool enough to believe that, my lord. Already the days grow shorter. There can be no mistake, Aemon has had letters from the Citadel, findings in accord with his own. The end of summer stares us in the face.” Mormont reached out and clutched Tyrion tightly by the hand. “You must *make* them understand. I tell you, my lord, the darkness is coming. There are wild things in the woods, direwolves and mammoths and snow bears the size of aurochs, and I have seen darker shapes in my dreams.”

“In your dreams,” Tyrion echoed, thinking how badly he needed another strong drink.

Mormont was deaf to the edge in his voice. “The fisherfolk near Eastwatch have glimpsed white walkers on the shore.”

This time Tyrion could not hold his tongue. “The fisherfolk of Lannisport often glimpse merlings.”

“Denys Mallister writes that the mountain people are moving south, slipping past the Shadow Tower in numbers greater than ever before. They are running, my lord... but running from *what*?” Lord Mormont moved to the window and stared out into the night. “These are old bones, Lannister, but they have never felt a chill like this. Tell the king what I say, I pray you. Winter *is* coming, and when the Long Night falls, only the Night’s Watch will stand between the realm and the darkness that sweeps from the north. The gods help us all if we are not ready.”

“The gods help *me* if I do not get some sleep tonight. Yoren is determined to ride at first light.” Tyrion got to his feet, sleepy from wine and tired of doom. “I thank you for all the courtesies you have done me, Lord Mormont.”

“Tell them, Tyrion. Tell them and make them believe. That is all the thanks I need.” He whistled, and his raven flew to him and perched on his shoulder. Mormont smiled and gave the bird some corn from his pocket, and that was how Tyrion left him.

It was bitter cold outside. Bundled thickly in his furs, Tyrion Lannister pulled on his gloves and nodded to the poor frozen wretches standing sentry outside the Commander’s Keep. He set off across the yard for his own chambers in the King’s Tower, walking as briskly as his legs could manage. Patches of snow crunched beneath his feet as his boots broke the night’s crust, and his breath steamed before him like a banner. He shoved his hands into his armpits and walked faster, praying that Morrec had remembered to warm his bed with hot bricks from the fire.

Behind the King’s Tower, the Wall glimmered in the light of the moon, immense and mysterious. Tyrion stopped for a moment to look up at it. His legs ached of cold and haste.

Suddenly a strange madness took hold of him, a yearning to look once more off the end of the world. It would be his last chance, he thought; tomorrow he would ride south, and he could not imagine why he would ever want to return to this frozen desolation. The King’s Tower was before him, with its promise of warmth and a soft bed, yet Tyrion found himself walking past it, toward the vast pale palisade of the Wall.

A wooden stair ascended the south face, anchored on huge rough-hewn beams sunk deep into the ice and frozen in place. Back and forth it switched, clawing its way upward as crooked as a bolt of lightning. The black brothers assured him that it was much stronger than it looked, but Tyrion’s legs were cramping too badly for him to even contemplate the ascent. He went instead to the iron cage beside the well, clambered inside, and yanked hard on the bell rope, three quick pulls.

He had to wait what seemed an eternity, standing there inside the bars with the Wall to his back. Long enough for Tyrion to begin to wonder why he was doing this. He had just about decided to forget his sudden whim and go to bed when the cage gave a jerk and began to ascend.

He moved upward slowly, by fits and starts at first, then more smoothly. The ground fell away beneath him, the cage swung, and Tyrion wrapped his hands around the iron bars. He could feel the cold of the metal even through his gloves. Morrec had a fire burning in his room, he noted with approval, but the Lord Commander's tower was dark. The Old Bear had more sense than he did, it seemed.

Then he was above the towers, still inching his way upward. Castle Black lay below him, etched in moonlight. You could see how stark and empty it was from up here; windowless keeps, crumbling walls, courtyards choked with broken stone. Farther off, he could see the lights of Mole's Town, the little village half a league south along the kingsroad, and here and there the bright glitter of moonlight on water where icy streams descended from the mountain heights to cut across the plains. The rest of the world was a bleak emptiness of windswept hills and rocky fields spotted with snow.

Finally a thick voice behind him said, "Seven hells, it's the dwarf," and the cage jerked to a sudden stop and hung there, swinging slowly back and forth, the ropes creaking.

"Bring him in, damn it." There was a grunt and a loud groaning of wood as the cage slid sideways and then the Wall was beneath him. Tyrion waited until the swinging had stopped before he pushed open the cage door and hopped down onto the ice. A heavy figure in black was leaning on the winch, while a second held the cage with a gloved hand. Their faces were muffled in woolen scarves so only their eyes showed, and they were plump with layers of wool and leather, black on black. "And what will you be wanting, this time of night?" the one by the winch asked.

"A last look."

The men exchanged sour glances. "Look all you want," the other one said. "Just have a care you don't fall off, little man. The Old Bear would have our hides." A small wooden shack stood under the great crane, and Tyrion saw the dull glow of a brazier and felt a brief gust of warmth when the winch men opened the door and went back inside. And then he was alone.



It was bitingly cold up here, and the wind pulled at his clothes like an insistent lover. The top of the Wall was wider than the kingsroad often was, so Tyrion had no fear of falling, although the footing was slicker than he would have liked. The brothers spread crushed stone across the walkways, but the weight of countless footsteps would melt the Wall beneath, so the ice would seem to grow around the gravel, swallowing it, until the path was bare again and it was time to crush more stone.

Still, it was nothing that Tyrion could not manage. He looked off to the east and west, at the Wall stretching before him, a vast white road with no beginning and no end and a dark abyss on either side. West, he decided, for no special reason, and he began to walk that way, following the pathway nearest the north edge, where the gravel looked freshest.

His bare cheeks were ruddy with the cold, and his legs complained more loudly with every step, but Tyrion ignored them. The wind swirled around him, gravel crunched beneath his boots, while ahead the white ribbon followed the lines of the hills, rising higher and higher, until it was lost beyond the western horizon. He passed a massive catapult, as tall as a city wall, its base sunk deep into the Wall. The throwing arm had been taken off for repairs and then forgotten; it lay there like a broken toy, half-embedded in the ice.

On the far side of the catapult, a muffled voice called out a challenge. “Who goes there? Halt!”

Tyrion stopped. “If I halt too long I’ll freeze in place, Jon,” he said as a shaggy pale shape slid toward him silently and sniffed at his furs. “Hello, Ghost.”

Jon Snow moved closer. He looked bigger and heavier in his layers of fur and leather, the hood of his cloak pulled down over his face.

“Lannister,” he said, yanking loose the scarf to uncover his mouth. “This is the last place I would have expected to see you.” He carried a heavy spear tipped in iron, taller than he was, and a sword hung at his side in a leather sheath. Across his chest was a gleaming black warhorn, banded with silver.

“This is the last place I would have expected to be seen,” Tyrion admitted. “I was captured by a whim. If I touch Ghost, will he chew my

hand off?”

“Not with me here,” Jon promised.

Tyrion scratched the white wolf behind the ears. The red eyes watched him impassively. The beast came up as high as his chest now. Another year, and Tyrion had the gloomy feeling he’d be looking *up* at him. “What are *you* doing up here tonight?” he asked. “Besides freezing your manhood off...”

“I have drawn night guard,” Jon said. “Again. Ser Alliser has kindly arranged for the watch commander to take a special interest in me. He seems to think that if they keep me awake half the night, I’ll fall asleep during morning drill. So far I have disappointed him.”

Tyrion grinned. “And has Ghost learned to juggle yet?”

“No,” said Jon, smiling, “but Grenn held his own against Halder this morning, and Pyp is no longer dropping his sword quite so often as he did.”

“Pyp?”

“Pypar is his real name. The small boy with the large ears. He saw me working with Grenn and asked for help. Thorne had never even shown him the proper way to grip a sword.” He turned to look north. “I have a mile of Wall to guard. Will you walk with me?”

“If you walk slowly,” Tyrion said.

“The watch commander tells me I must walk, to keep my blood from freezing, but he never said how fast.”

They walked, with Ghost pacing along beside Jon like a white shadow. “I leave on the morrow,” Tyrion said.

“I know.” Jon sounded strangely sad.

“I plan to stop at Winterfell on the way south. If there is any message that you would like me to deliver...”

“Tell Robb that I’m going to command the Night’s Watch and keep him safe, so he might as well take up needlework with the girls and have Mikken melt down his sword for horseshoes.”

“Your brother is bigger than me,” Tyrion said with a laugh. “I decline to deliver any message that might get me killed.”

“Rickon will ask when I’m coming home. Try to explain where I’ve gone, if you can. Tell him he can have all my things while I’m away, he’ll like that.”

People seemed to be asking a great deal of him today, Tyrion Lannister thought. “You could put all this in a letter, you know.”

“Rickon can’t read yet. Bran...” He stopped suddenly. “I don’t know what message to send to Bran. Help him, Tyrion.”

“What help could I give him? I am no maester, to ease his pain. I have no spells to give him back his legs.”

“You gave me help when I needed it,” Jon Snow said.

“I gave you nothing,” Tyrion said. “Words.”

“Then give your words to Bran too.”

“You’re asking a lame man to teach a cripple how to dance,” Tyrion said. “However sincere the lesson, the result is likely to be grotesque. Still, I know what it is to love a brother, Lord Snow. I will give Bran whatever small help is in my power.”

“Thank you, my lord of Lannister.” He pulled off his glove and offered his bare hand. “Friend.”

Tyrion found himself oddly touched. “Most of my kin are bastards,” he said with a wry smile, “but you’re the first I’ve had to friend.” He pulled a glove off with his teeth and clasped Snow by the hand, flesh against flesh. The boy’s grip was firm and strong.

When he had donned his glove again, Jon Snow turned abruptly and walked to the low, icy northern parapet. Beyond him the Wall fell away sharply; beyond him there was only the darkness and the wild. Tyrion followed him, and side by side they stood upon the edge of the world.

The Night’s Watch permitted the forest to come no closer than half a mile of the north face of the Wall. The thickets of ironwood and sentinel and oak that had once grown there had been harvested centuries ago, to create a broad swath of open ground through which no enemy could hope to

pass unseen. Tyrion had heard that elsewhere along the Wall, between the three fortresses, the wildwood had come creeping back over the decades, that there were places where grey-green sentinels and pale white weirwoods had taken root in the shadow of the Wall itself, but Castle Black had a prodigious appetite for firewood, and here the forest was still kept at bay by the axes of the black brothers.

It was never far, though. From up here Tyrion could see it, the dark trees looming beyond the stretch of open ground, like a second wall built parallel to the first, a wall of night. Few axes had ever swung in *that* black wood, where even the moonlight could not penetrate the ancient tangle of root and thorn and grasping limb. Out there the trees grew huge, and the rangers said they seemed to brood and knew not men. It was small wonder the Night's Watch named it the haunted forest.

As he stood there and looked at all that darkness with no fires burning anywhere, with the wind blowing and the cold like a spear in his guts, Tyrion Lannister felt as though he could almost believe the talk of the Others, the enemy in the night. His jokes of grumkins and snarks no longer seemed quite so droll.

"My uncle is out there," Jon Snow said softly, leaning on his spear as he stared off into the darkness. "The first night they sent me up here, I thought, Uncle Benjen will ride back tonight, and I'll see him first and blow the horn. He never came, though. Not that night and not any night."

"Give him time," Tyrion said.

Far off to the north, a wolf began to howl. Another voice picked up the call, then another. Ghost cocked his head and listened. "If he doesn't come back," Jon Snow promised, "Ghost and I will go find him." He put his hand on the direwolf's head.

"I believe you," Tyrion said, but what he thought was, *And who will go find you?* He shivered.