

TYRION

Somewhere in the great stone maze of Winterfell, a wolf howled. The sound hung over the castle like a flag of mourning.

Tyrion Lannister looked up from his books and shivered, though the library was snug and warm. Something about the howling of a wolf took a man right out of his here and now and left him in a dark forest of the mind, running naked before the pack.

When the direwolf howled again, Tyrion shut the heavy leatherbound cover on the book he was reading, a hundred-year-old discourse on the changing of the seasons by a long-dead maester. He covered a yawn with the back of his hand. His reading lamp was flickering, its oil all but gone, as dawn light leaked through the high windows. He had been at it all night, but that was nothing new. Tyrion Lannister was not much a one for sleeping.

His legs were stiff and sore as he eased down off the bench. He massaged some life back into them and limped heavily to the table where the septon was snoring softly, his head pillowed on an open book in front of him. Tyrion glanced at the title. A life of the Grand Maester Aethelmure, no wonder. “Chayle,” he said softly. The young man jerked up, blinking, confused, the crystal of his order swinging wildly on its silver chain. “I’m off to break my fast. See that you return the books to the shelves. Be gentle with the Valyrian scrolls, the parchment is very dry. Ayrmidon’s *Engines of War* is quite rare, and yours is the only complete copy I’ve ever seen.” Chayle gaped at him, still half-asleep. Patiently, Tyrion repeated his instructions, then clapped the septon on the shoulder and left him to his tasks.

Outside, Tyrion swallowed a lungful of the cold morning air and began his laborious descent of the steep stone steps that corkscrewed around the exterior of the library tower. It was slow going; the steps were cut high and narrow, while his legs were short and twisted. The rising sun had not yet cleared the walls of Winterfell, but the men were already hard at it in the

yard below. Sandor Clegane's rasping voice drifted up to him. "The boy is a long time dying. I wish he would be quicker about it."

Tyrion glanced down and saw the Hound standing with young Joffrey as squires swarmed around them. "At least he dies quietly," the prince replied. "It's the wolf that makes the noise. I could scarce sleep last night."

Clegane cast a long shadow across the hard-packed earth as his squire lowered the black helm over his head. "I could silence the creature, if it please you," he said through his open visor. His boy placed a longsword in his hand. He tested the weight of it, slicing at the cold morning air. Behind him, the yard rang to the clangor of steel on steel.

The notion seemed to delight the prince. "Send a dog to kill a dog!" he exclaimed. "Winterfell is so infested with wolves, the Starks would never miss one."

Tyrion hopped off the last step onto the yard. "I beg to differ, nephew," he said. "The Starks can count past six. Unlike some princes I might name."

Joffrey had the grace at least to blush.

"A voice from nowhere," Sandor said. He peered through his helm, looking this way and that. "Spirits of the air!"

The prince laughed, as he always laughed when his bodyguard did this mummer's farce. Tyrion was used to it. "Down here."

The tall man peered down at the ground, and pretended to notice him. "The little lord Tyrion," he said. "My pardons. I did not see you standing there."

"I am in no mood for your insolence today." Tyrion turned to his nephew. "Joffrey, it is past time you called on Lord Eddard and his lady, to offer them your comfort."

Joffrey looked as petulant as only a boy prince can look. "What good will my comfort do them?"

"None," Tyrion said. "Yet it is expected of you. Your absence has been noted."

"The Stark boy is nothing to me," Joffrey said. "I cannot abide the wailing of women."

Tyrion Lannister reached up and slapped his nephew hard across the face. The boy's cheek began to redden.

"One word," Tyrion said, "and I will hit you again."

"I'm going to tell Mother!" Joffrey exclaimed.

Tyrion hit him again. Now both cheeks flamed.

"You tell your mother," Tyrion told him. "But first you get yourself to Lord and Lady Stark, and you fall to your knees in front of them, and you tell them how very sorry you are, and that you are at their service if there is the slightest thing you can do for them or theirs in this desperate hour, and that all your prayers go with them. Do you understand? *Do you?*"

The boy looked as though he was going to cry. Instead, he managed a weak nod. Then he turned and fled headlong from the yard, holding his cheek. Tyrion watched him run.

A shadow fell across his face. He turned to find Clegane looming overhead like a cliff. His soot-dark armor seemed to blot out the sun. He had lowered the visor on his helm. It was fashioned in the likeness of a snarling black hound, fearsome to behold, but Tyrion had always thought it a great improvement over Clegane's hideously burned face.

"The prince will remember that, little lord," the Hound warned him. The helm turned his laugh into a hollow rumble.

"I pray he does," Tyrion Lannister replied. "If he forgets, be a good dog and remind him." He glanced around the courtyard. "Do you know where I might find my brother?"

"Breaking fast with the queen."

"Ah," Tyrion said. He gave Sandor Clegane a perfunctory nod and walked away as briskly as his stunted legs would carry him, whistling. He pitied the first knight to try the Hound today. The man did have a temper.

A cold, cheerless meal had been laid out in the morning room of the Guest House. Jaime sat at table with Cersei and the children, talking in low, hushed voices.

"Is Robert still abed?" Tyrion asked as he seated himself, uninvited, at the table.

His sister peered at him with the same expression of faint distaste she had worn since the day he was born. “The king has not slept at all,” she told him. “He is with Lord Eddard. He has taken their sorrow deeply to heart.”

“He has a large heart, our Robert,” Jaime said with a lazy smile. There was very little that Jaime took seriously. Tyrion knew that about his brother, and forgave it. During all the terrible long years of his childhood, only Jaime had ever shown him the smallest measure of affection or respect, and for that Tyrion was willing to forgive him most anything.

A servant approached. “Bread,” Tyrion told him, “and two of those little fish, and a mug of that good dark beer to wash them down. Oh, and some bacon. Burn it until it turns black.” The man bowed and moved off. Tyrion turned back to his siblings. Twins, male and female. They looked very much the part this morning. Both had chosen a deep green that matched their eyes. Their blond curls were all a fashionable tumble, and gold ornaments shone at wrists and fingers and throats.

Tyrion wondered what it would be like to have a twin, and decided that he would rather not know. Bad enough to face himself in a looking glass every day. Another him was a thought too dreadful to contemplate.

Prince Tommen spoke up. “Do you have news of Bran, Uncle?”

“I stopped by the sickroom last night,” Tyrion announced. “There was no change. The maester thought that a hopeful sign.”

“I don’t want Brandon to die,” Tommen said timorously. He was a sweet boy. Not like his brother, but then Jaime and Tyrion were somewhat less than peas in a pod themselves.

“Lord Eddard had a brother named Brandon as well,” Jaime mused. “One of the hostages murdered by Targaryen. It seems to be an unlucky name.”

“Oh, not so unlucky as all that, surely,” Tyrion said. The servant brought his plate. He ripped off a chunk of black bread.

Cersei was studying him warily. “What do you mean?”

Tyrion gave her a crooked smile. “Why, only that Tommen may get his wish. The maester thinks the boy may yet live.” He took a sip of beer.

Myrcella gave a happy gasp, and Tommen smiled nervously, but it was not the children Tyrion was watching. The glance that passed between Jaime and Cersei lasted no more than a second, but he did not miss it. Then his sister dropped her gaze to the table. "That is no mercy. These northern gods are cruel to let the child linger in such pain."

"What were the maester's words?" Jaime asked.

The bacon crunched when he bit into it. Tyrion chewed thoughtfully for a moment and said, "He thinks that if the boy were going to die, he would have done so already. It has been four days with no change."

"Will Bran get better, Uncle?" little Myrcella asked. She had all of her mother's beauty, and none of her nature.

"His back is broken, little one," Tyrion told her. "The fall shattered his legs as well. They keep him alive with honey and water, or he would starve to death. Perhaps, if he wakes, he will be able to eat real food, but he will never walk again."

"If he wakes," Cersei repeated. "Is that likely?"

"The gods alone know," Tyrion told her. "The maester only hopes." He chewed some more bread. "I would swear that wolf of his is keeping the boy alive. The creature is outside his window day and night, howling. Every time they chase it away, it returns. The maester said they closed the window once, to shut out the noise, and Bran seemed to weaken. When they opened it again, his heart beat stronger."

The queen shuddered. "There is something unnatural about those animals," she said. "They are dangerous. I will *not* have any of them coming south with us."

Jaime said, "You'll have a hard time stopping them, sister. They follow those girls everywhere."

Tyrion started on his fish. "Are you leaving soon, then?"

"Not near soon enough," Cersei said. Then she frowned. "Are we leaving?" she echoed. "What about you? Gods, don't tell me you are staying *here*?"

Tyrion shrugged. “Benjen Stark is returning to the Night’s Watch with his brother’s bastard. I have a mind to go with them and see this Wall we have all heard so much of.”

Jaime smiled. “I hope you’re not thinking of taking the black on us, sweet brother.”

Tyrion laughed. “What, me, celibate? The whores would go begging from Dorne to Casterly Rock. No, I just want to stand on top of the Wall and piss off the edge of the world.”

Cersei stood abruptly. “The children don’t need to hear this filth. Tommen, Myrcella, come.” She strode briskly from the morning room, her train and her pups trailing behind her.

Jaime Lannister regarded his brother thoughtfully with those cool green eyes. “Stark will never consent to leave Winterfell with his son lingering in the shadow of death.”

“He will if Robert commands it,” Tyrion said. “And Robert *will* command it. There is nothing Lord Eddard can do for the boy in any case.”

“He could end his torment,” Jaime said. “I would, if it were my son. It would be a mercy.”

“I advise against putting that suggestion to Lord Eddard, sweet brother,” Tyrion said. “He would not take it kindly.”

“Even if the boy does live, he will be a cripple. Worse than a cripple. A grotesque. Give me a good clean death.”

Tyrion replied with a shrug that accentuated the twist of his shoulders. “Speaking for the grotesques,” he said, “I beg to differ. Death is so terribly final, while life is full of possibilities.”

Jaime smiled. “You are a perverse little imp, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” Tyrion admitted. “I hope the boy does wake. I would be most interested to hear what he might have to say.”

His brother’s smile curdled like sour milk. “Tyrion, my sweet brother,” he said darkly, “there are times when you give me cause to wonder whose side you are on.”

Tyrion's mouth was full of bread and fish. He took a swallow of strong black beer to wash it all down, and grinned up wolfishly at Jaime, "Why, Jaime, my sweet brother," he said, "you wound me. You know how much I love my family."