

TYRION

The north went on forever.

Tyrion Lannister knew the maps as well as anyone, but a fortnight on the wild track that passed for the kingsroad up here had brought home the lesson that the map was one thing and the land quite another.

They had left Winterfell on the same day as the king, amidst all the commotion of the royal departure, riding out to the sound of men shouting and horses snorting, to the rattle of wagons and the groaning of the queen's huge wheelhouse, as a light snow flurried about them. The kingsroad was just beyond the sprawl of castle and town. There the banners and the wagons and the columns of knights and freeriders turned south, taking the tumult with them, while Tyrion turned north with Benjen Stark and his nephew.

It had grown colder after that, and far more quiet.

West of the road were flint hills, grey and rugged, with tall watchtowers on their stony summits. To the east the land was lower, the ground flattening to a rolling plain that stretched away as far as the eye could see. Stone bridges spanned swift, narrow rivers, while small farms spread in rings around holdfasts walled in wood and stone. The road was well trafficked, and at night for their comfort there were rude inns to be found.

Three days ride from Winterfell, however, the farmland gave way to dense wood, and the kingsroad grew lonely. The flint hills rose higher and wilder with each passing mile, until by the fifth day they had turned into mountains, cold blue-grey giants with jagged promontories and snow on their shoulders. When the wind blew from the north, long plumes of ice crystals flew from the high peaks like banners.

With the mountains a wall to the west, the road veered north by northeast through the wood, a forest of oak and evergreen and black brier that seemed older and darker than any Tyrion had ever seen. "The wolfswood," Benjen Stark called it, and indeed their nights came alive with the howls of distant packs, and some not so distant. Jon Snow's albino direwolf pricked up his ears at the nightly howling, but never raised his own voice in reply. There was something very unsettling about that animal, Tyrion thought.

There were eight in the party by then, not counting the wolf. Tyrion traveled with two of his own men, as befit a Lannister. Benjen Stark had only his bastard nephew and some fresh mounts for the Night's Watch, but at the edge of the wolfswood they stayed a night behind the wooden walls of a forest holdfast, and there joined up with another of the black brothers, one Yoren. Yoren was stooped and sinister, his features hidden behind a beard as black as his clothing, but he seemed as tough as an old root and as hard as stone. With him were a pair of ragged peasant boys from the Fingers. "Rapers," Yoren said with a cold look at his charges. Tyrion understood. Life on the Wall was said to be hard, but no doubt it was preferable to castration.

Five men, three boys, a direwolf, twenty horses, and a cage of ravens given over to Benjen Stark by Maester Luwin. No doubt they made a curious fellowship for the kingsroad, or any road.