

dragonfire. Sometimes I'd imagine my father burning. At other times, my sister." Jon Snow was staring at him, a look equal parts horror and fascination. Tyrion guffawed. "Don't look at me that way, bastard. I know your secret. You've dreamt the same kind of dreams."

"No," Jon Snow said, horrified. "I wouldn't..."

"No? Never?" Tyrion raised an eyebrow. "Well, no doubt the Starks have been terribly good to you. I'm certain Lady Stark treats you as if you were one of her own. And your brother Robb, he's always been kind, and why not? He gets Winterfell and you get the Wall. And your father... he must have good reasons for packing you off to the Night's Watch."

"Stop it," Jon Snow said, his face dark with anger. "The Night's Watch is a noble calling!"

Tyrion laughed. "You're too smart to believe that. The Night's Watch is a midden heap for all the misfits of the realm. I've seen you looking at Yoren and his boys. Those are your new brothers, Jon Snow, how do you like them? Sullen peasants, debtors, poachers, rapers, thieves, and bastards like you all wind up on the Wall, watching for grumkins and snarks and all the other monsters your wet nurse warned you about. The good part is there are no grumkins or snarks, so it's scarcely dangerous work. The bad part is you freeze your balls off, but since you're not allowed to breed anyway, I don't suppose that matters."

"Stop it!" the boy screamed. He took a step forward, his hands coiling into fists, close to tears. Suddenly, absurdly, Tyrion felt guilty. He took a step forward, intending to give the boy a reassuring pat on the shoulder or mutter some word of apology.

He never saw the wolf, where it was or how it came at him. One moment he was walking toward Snow and the next he was flat on his back on the hard rocky ground, the book spinning away from him as he fell, the breath going out of him at the sudden impact, his mouth full of dirt and blood and rotting leaves. As he tried to get up, his back spasmed painfully. He must have wrenched it in the fall. He ground his teeth in frustration, grabbed a root, and pulled himself back to a sitting position. "Help me," he said to the boy, reaching up a hand.

And suddenly the wolf was between them. He did not growl. The damned thing never made a sound. He only looked at him with those bright red eyes, and showed him his teeth, and that was more than enough. Tyrion sagged back to the ground with a grunt. "Don't help me, then. I'll sit right here until you leave."

Jon Snow stroked Ghost's thick white fur, smiling now. "Ask me nicely."

Tyrion Lannister felt the anger coiling inside him, and crushed it out with a will. It was not the first time in his life he had been humiliated, and it would not be the last. Perhaps he even deserved this. "I should be very grateful for your kind assistance, Jon," he said mildly.

"Down, Ghost," the boy said. The direwolf sat on his haunches. Those red eyes never left Tyrion. Jon came around behind him, slid his hands under his arms, and lifted him easily to his feet. Then he picked up the book and handed it back.

"Why did he attack me?" Tyrion asked with a sidelong glance at the direwolf. He wiped blood and dirt from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Maybe he thought you were a grumkin."