

Tyrion noticed Jon Snow watching Yoren and his sullen companions, with an odd cast to his face that looked uncomfortably like dismay. Yoren had a twisted shoulder and a sour smell, his hair and beard were matted and greasy and full of lice, his clothing old, patched, and seldom washed. His two young recruits smelled even worse, and seemed as stupid as they were cruel.

No doubt the boy had made the mistake of thinking that the Night's Watch was made up of men like his uncle. If so, Yoren and his companions were a rude awakening. Tyrion felt sorry for the boy. He had chosen a hard life... or perhaps he should say that a hard life had been chosen for him.

He had rather less sympathy for the uncle. Benjen Stark seemed to share his brother's distaste for Lannisters, and he had not been pleased when Tyrion had told him of his intentions. "I warn you, Lannister, you'll find no inns at the Wall," he had said, looking down on him.

"No doubt you'll find some place to put me," Tyrion had replied. "As you might have noticed, I'm small."

One did not say no to the queen's brother, of course, so that had settled the matter, but Stark had not been happy. "You will not like the ride, I promise you that," he'd said curtly, and since the moment they set out, he had done all he could to live up to that promise.

By the end of the first week, Tyrion's thighs were raw from hard riding, his legs were cramping badly, and he was chilled to the bone. He did not complain. He was damned if he would give Benjen Stark that satisfaction.

He took a small revenge in the matter of his riding fur, a tattered bearskin, old and musty-smelling. Stark had offered it to him in an excess of Night's Watch gallantry, no doubt expecting him to graciously decline. Tyrion had accepted with a smile. He had brought his warmest clothing with him when they rode out of Winterfell, and soon discovered that it was nowhere near warm enough. It was cold up here, and growing colder. The nights were well below freezing now, and when the wind blew it was like a knife cutting right through his warmest woollens. By now Stark was no doubt regretting his chivalrous impulse. Perhaps he had learned a lesson. The Lannisters never declined, graciously or otherwise. The Lannisters took what was offered.

Farms and holdfasts grew scarcer and smaller as they pressed northward, ever deeper into the darkness of the wolfswood, until finally there were no more roofs to shelter under, and they were thrown back on their own resources.

Tyrion was never much use in making a camp or breaking one. Too small, too hobbled, too in-the-way. So while Stark and Yoren and the other men erected rude shelters, tended the horses, and built a fire, it became his custom to take his fur and a wineskin and go off by himself to read. On the eighteenth night of their journey, the wine was a rare sweet amber from the Summer Isles that he had brought all the way north from Casterly Rock, and the book a rumination on the history and properties of dragons. With Lord Eddard Stark's permission, Tyrion had borrowed a few rare volumes from the Winterfell library and packed them for the ride north.

He found a comfortable spot just beyond the noise of the camp, beside a swift-running stream with waters clear and cold as ice. A grotesquely ancient oak provided shelter from the biting wind. Tyrion curled up in his fur with his back against the trunk, took a sip of the wine, and