

Tyrion glanced at him sharply. Then he laughed, a raw snort of amusement that came bursting out through his nose entirely without his permission. "Oh, gods," he said, choking on his laughter and shaking his head, "I suppose I do rather look like a grumkin. What does he do to snarks?"

"You don't want to know." Jon picked up the wineskin and handed it to Tyrion.

Tyrion pulled out the stopper, tilted his head, and squeezed a long stream into his mouth. The wine was cool fire as it trickled down his throat and warmed his belly. He held out the skin to Jon Snow. "Want some?"

The boy took the skin and tried a cautious swallow. "It's true, isn't it?" he said when he was done. "What you said about the Night's Watch."

Tyrion nodded.

Jon Snow set his mouth in a grim line. "If that's what it is, that's what it is."

Tyrion grinned at him. "That's good, bastard. Most men would rather deny a hard truth than face it."

"Most men," the boy said. "But not you."

"No," Tyrion admitted, "not me. I seldom even dream of dragons anymore. There are no dragons." He scooped up the fallen bearskin. "Come, we had better return to camp before your uncle calls the banners."

The walk was short, but the ground was rough underfoot and his legs were cramping badly by the time they got back. Jon Snow offered a hand to help him over a thick tangle of roots, but Tyrion shook him off. He would make his own way, as he had all his life. Still, the camp was a welcome sight. The shelters had been thrown up against the tumbledown wall of a long-abandoned holdfast, a shield against the wind. The horses had been fed and a fire had been laid. Yoren sat on a stone, skinning a squirrel. The savory smell of stew filled Tyrion's nostrils. He dragged himself over to where his man Morrec was tending the stewpot. Wordlessly, Morrec handed him the ladle. Tyrion tasted and handed it back. "More pepper," he said.

Benjen Stark emerged from the shelter he shared with his nephew. "There you are. Jon, damn it, don't go off like that by yourself. I thought the Others had gotten you."

"It was the grumkins," Tyrion told him, laughing. Jon Snow smiled. Stark shot a baffled look at Yoren. The old man grunted, shrugged, and went back to his bloody work.

The squirrel gave some body to the stew, and they ate it with black bread and hard cheese that night around their fire. Tyrion shared around his skin of wine until even Yoren grew mellow. One by one the company drifted off to their shelters and to sleep, all but Jon Snow, who had drawn the night's first watch.

Tyrion was the last to retire, as always. As he stepped into the shelter his men had built for him, he paused and looked back at Jon Snow. The boy stood near the fire, his face still and hard, looking deep into the flames.

Tyrion Lannister smiled sadly and went to bed.