

cheeks. Someone tried to steady him. He wrenched free of their grip and ran, half-blind, for the door. Ghost followed close at his heels, out into the night.

The yard was quiet and empty. A lone sentry stood high on the battlements of the inner wall, his cloak pulled tight around him against the cold. He looked bored and miserable as he huddled there alone, but Jon would have traded places with him in an instant. Otherwise the castle was dark and deserted. Jon had seen an abandoned holdfast once, a drear place where nothing moved but the wind and the stones kept silent about whatever people had lived there. Winterfell reminded him of that tonight.

The sounds of music and song spilled through the open windows behind him. They were the last things Jon wanted to hear. He wiped away his tears on the sleeve of his shirt, furious that he had let them fall, and turned to go.

“Boy,” a voice called out to him. Jon turned.

Tyrion Lannister was sitting on the ledge above the door to the Great Hall, looking for all the world like a gargoyle. The dwarf grinned down at him. “Is that animal a wolf?”

“A direwolf,” Jon said. “His name is Ghost.” He stared up at the little man, his disappointment suddenly forgotten. “What are you doing up there? Why aren’t you at the feast?”

“Too hot, too noisy, and I’d drunk too much wine,” the dwarf told him. “I learned long ago that it is considered rude to vomit on your brother. Might I have a closer look at your wolf?”

Jon hesitated, then nodded slowly. “Can you climb down, or shall I bring a ladder?”

“Oh, bleed that,” the little man said. He pushed himself off the ledge into empty air. Jon gasped, then watched with awe as Tyrion Lannister spun around in a tight ball, landed lightly on his hands, then vaulted backward onto his legs.

Ghost backed away from him uncertainly.

The dwarf dusted himself off and laughed. “I believe I’ve frightened your wolf. My apologies.”

“He’s not scared,” Jon said. He knelt and called out. “Ghost, come here. Come on. That’s it.”

The wolf pup padded closer and nuzzled at Jon’s face, but he kept a wary eye on Tyrion Lannister, and when the dwarf reached out to pet him, he drew back and bared his fangs in a silent snarl. “Shy, isn’t he?” Lannister observed.

“Sit, Ghost,” Jon commanded. “That’s it. Keep still.” He looked up at the dwarf. “You can touch him now. He won’t move until I tell him to. I’ve been training him.”

“I see,” Lannister said. He ruffled the snow-white fur between Ghost’s ears and said, “Nice wolf.”

“If I wasn’t here, he’d tear out your throat,” Jon said. It wasn’t actually true yet, but it would be.

“In that case, you had best stay close,” the dwarf said. He cocked his oversized head to one side and looked Jon over with his mismatched eyes. “I am Tyrion Lannister.”

“I know,” Jon said. He rose. Standing, he was taller than the dwarf. It made him feel strange.

“You’re Ned Stark’s bastard, aren’t you?”

Jon felt a coldness pass right through him. He pressed his lips together and said nothing.