

“The Watch has no shortage of stableboys,” Lord Mormont grumbled. “That seems to be all they send us these days. Stableboys and sneak thieves and rapers. Ser Alliser is an anointed knight, one of the few to take the black since I have been Lord Commander. He fought bravely at King’s Landing.”

“On the wrong side,” Ser Jeremy Rykker commented dryly. “I ought to know, I was there on the battlements beside him. Tywin Lannister gave us a splendid choice. Take the black, or see our heads on spikes before evenfall. No offense intended, Tyrion.”

“None taken, Ser Jeremy. My father is very fond of spiked heads, especially those of people who have annoyed him in some fashion. And a face as noble as yours, well, no doubt he saw you decorating the city wall above the King’s Gate. I think you would have looked very striking up there.”

“Thank you,” Ser Jeremy replied with a sardonic smile.

Lord Commander Mormont cleared his throat. “Sometimes I fear Ser Alliser saw you true, Tyrion. You do mock us and our noble purpose here.”

Tyrion shrugged. “We all need to be mocked from time to time, Lord Mormont, lest we start to take ourselves too seriously. More wine, please.” He held out his cup.

As Rykker filled it for him, Bowen Marsh said, “You have a great thirst for a small man.”

“Oh, I think that Lord Tyrion is quite a large man,” Maester Aemon said from the far end of the table. He spoke softly, yet the high officers of the Night’s Watch all fell quiet, the better to hear what the ancient had to say. “I think he is a giant come among us, here at the end of the world.”

Tyrion answered gently, “I’ve been called many things, my lord, but giant is seldom one of them.”

“Nonetheless,” Maester Aemon said as his clouded, milk-white eyes moved to Tyrion’s face, “I think it is true.”

For once, Tyrion Lannister found himself at a loss for words. He could only bow his head politely and say, “You are too kind, Maester Aemon.”

The blind man smiled. He was a tiny thing, wrinkled and hairless, shrunken beneath the weight of a hundred years so his maester’s collar with its links of many metals hung loose about his throat. “I have been called many things, my lord,” he said, “but kind is seldom one of them.” This time Tyrion himself led the laughter.

Much later, when the serious business of eating was done and the others had left, Mormont offered Tyrion a chair beside the fire and a cup of mulled spirits so strong they brought tears to his eyes. “The kingsroad can be perilous this far north,” the Lord Commander told him as they drank.

“I have Jyck and Morrec,” Tyrion said, “and Yoren is riding south again.”

“Yoren is only one man. The Watch shall escort you as far as Winterfell,” Mormont announced in a tone that brooked no argument. “Three men should be sufficient.”

“If you insist, my lord,” Tyrion said. “You might send young Snow. He would be glad for a chance to see his brothers.”