

THE LOST LORD

It should not have taken this long, Griff told himself as he paced the deck of the *Shy Maid*. Had they lost Haldon as they had Tyrion Lannister? Could the Volantenes have taken him? *I should have sent Duck-field with him.* Haldon alone could not be trusted; he had proved that in Selhorys when he let the dwarf escape.

The *Shy Maid* was tied up in one of the meaner sections of the long, chaotic riverfront, between a listing poleboat that had not left the pier in years and the gaily painted mummers' barge. The mummers were a loud and lively lot, always quoting speeches at each other and drunk more oft than not.

The day was hot and sticky, as all the days had been since they left the Sorrows. A ferocious southern sun beat down upon the crowded riverfront of Volon Therys, but heat was the last and least of Griff's concerns. The Golden Company was encamped three miles south of town, well north of where he had expected them, and Triarch Malaquo had come north with five thousand foot and a thousand horse to cut them off from the delta road. Daenerys Targaryen remained a world away, and Tyrion Lannister ... well, he could be most anywhere. If the gods were good, Lannister's severed head was halfway back to King's Landing by now, but more like the dwarf was hale and whole and somewhere close, stinking drunk and plotting some new infamy.

"Where in the seven hells is Haldon?" Griff complained to Lady Lemoire. "How long should it take to buy three horses?"

She shrugged. "My lord, wouldn't it be safer to leave the boy here aboard the boat?"

"Safer, yes. Wiser, no. He is a man grown now, and this is the road that he was born to walk." Griff had no patience for this quibbling. He was sick of hiding, sick of waiting, sick of caution. *I do not have time enough for caution.*

“We have gone to great lengths to keep Prince Aegon hidden all these years,” Lemore reminded him. “The time will come for him to wash his hair and declare himself, I know, but that time is not now. Not to a camp of sellswords.”

“If Harry Strickland means him ill, hiding him on the *Shy Maid* will not protect him. Strickland has ten thousand swords at his command. We have Duck. Aegon is all that could be wanted in a prince. They need to see that, Strickland and the rest. These are his own men.”

“His because they’re bought and paid for. Ten thousand armed strangers, plus hangers-on and camp followers. All it takes is one to bring us all to ruin. If Hugor’s head was worth a lord’s honors, how much will Cersei Lannister pay for the rightful heir to the Iron Throne? You do not know these men, my lord. It has been a dozen years since you last rode with the Golden Company, and your old friend is dead.”

Blackheart. Myles Toyne had been so full of life the last time Griff had left him, it was hard to accept that he was gone. *A golden skull atop a pole, and Homeless Harry Strickland in his place.* Lemore was not wrong, he knew. Whatever their sires or their grandsires might have been back in Westeros before their exile, the men of the Golden Company were sell-swords now, and no sellsword could be trusted. Even so ...

Last night he’d dreamt of Stoney Sept again. Alone, with sword in hand, he ran from house to house, smashing down doors, racing up stairs, leaping from roof to roof, as his ears rang to the sound of distant bells. Deep bronze booms and silver chiming pounded through his skull, a maddening cacophony of noise that grew ever louder until it seemed as if his head would explode.

Seventeen years had come and gone since the Battle of the Bells, yet the sound of bells ringing still tied a knot in his guts. Others might claim that the realm was lost when Prince Rhaegar fell to Robert’s warhammer on the Trident, but the Battle of the Trident would never have been fought if the griffin had only slain the stag there in Stoney Sept. *The bells tolled for all of us that day. For Aerys and his queen, for Elia of Dorne and her little*

*daughter, for every true man and honest woman in the Seven Kingdoms.
And for my silver prince.*

“The plan was to reveal Prince Aegon only when we reached Queen Daenerys,” Lefore was saying.

“That was when we believed the girl was coming west. Our dragon queen has burned that plan to ash, and thanks to that fat fool in Pentos, we have grasped the she-dragon by the tail and burned our fingers to the bone.”

“Illyrio could not have been expected to know that the girl would choose to remain at Slaver’s Bay.”

“No more than he knew that the Beggar King would die young, or that Khal Drogo would follow him into the grave. Very little of what the fat man has anticipated has come to pass.” Griff slapped the hilt of his long-sword with a gloved hand. “I have danced to the fat man’s pipes for years, Lefore. What has it availed us? The prince is a man grown. His time is—”

“*Griff*,” Yandry called loudly, above the clanging of the mummers’ bell. “It’s Haldon.”

So it was. The Halfmaester looked hot and bedraggled as he made his way along the waterfront to the foot of the pier. Sweat had left dark rings beneath the arms of his light linen robes, and he had the same sour look on his long face as at Selhorys, when he returned to the *Shy Maid* to confess that the dwarf was gone. He was leading three horses, however, and that was all that mattered.

“Bring the boy,” Griff told Lefore. “See that he’s ready.”

“As you say,” she answered, unhappily.

So be it. He had grown fond of Lefore, but that did not mean he required her approval. Her task had been to instruct the prince in the doctrines of the Faith, and she had done that. No amount of prayer would put him on the Iron Throne, however. That was Griff’s task. He had failed Prince Rhaegar once. He would not fail his son, not whilst life remained in his body.

Haldon's horses did not please him. "Were these the best that you could find?" he complained to the Halfmaester.

"They were," said Haldon, in an irritated tone, "and you had best not ask what they cost us. With Dothraki across the river, half the populace of Volon Therys has decided they would sooner be elsewhere, so horseflesh grows more expensive every day."

I should have gone myself. After Selhorys, he had found it difficult to put the same trust in Haldon as previously. *He let the dwarf beguile him with that glib tongue of his. Let him wander off into a whorehouse alone while he lingered like a mooncalf in the square.* The brothel keeper had insisted that the little man had been carried off at swordpoint, but Griff was still not sure he believed that. The Imp was clever enough to have conspired in his own escape. This drunken captor that the whores spoke of could have been some henchman in his hire. *I share the blame. After the dwarf put himself between Aegon and the stone man, I let down my guard. I should have slit his throat the first time I laid eyes on him.*

"They will do well enough, I suppose," he told Haldon. "The camp is only three miles south." The *Shy Maid* would have gotten them there more quickly, but he preferred to keep Harry Strickland ignorant of where he and the prince had been. Nor did he relish the prospect of splashing through the shallows to climb some muddy riverbank. That sort of entrance might serve for a sellsword and his son, but not for a great lord and his prince.

When the lad emerged from the cabin with Lemoire by his side, Griff looked him over carefully from head to heel. The prince wore sword and dagger, black boots polished to a high sheen, a black cloak lined with blood-red silk. With his hair washed and cut and freshly dyed a deep, dark blue, his eyes looked blue as well. At his throat he wore three huge square-cut rubies on a chain of black iron, a gift from Magister Illyrio. *Red and black. Dragon colors.* That was good. "You look a proper prince," he told the boy. "Your father would be proud if he could see you."

Young Griff ran his fingers through his hair. "I am sick of this blue dye. We should have washed it out."

“Soon enough.” Griff would be glad to go back to his own true colors too, though his once red hair had gone to grey. He clapped the lad on the shoulder. “Shall we go? Your army awaits your coming.”

“I like the sound of that. My army.” A smile flashed across his face, then vanished. “Are they, though? They’re sellswords. Yollo warned me to trust no one.”

“There is wisdom in that,” Griff admitted. It might have been different if Blackheart still commanded, but Myles Toyne was four years dead, and Homeless Harry Strickland was a different sort of man. He would not say that to the boy, however. That dwarf had already planted enough doubts in his young head. “Not every man is what he seems, and a prince especially has good cause to be wary ... but go too far down that road, and the mistrust can poison you, make you sour and fearful.” *King Aerys was one such. By the end, even Rhaegar saw that plain enough.* “You would do best to walk a middle course. Let men earn your trust with leal service ... but when they do, be generous and openhearted.”

The boy nodded. “I will remember.”

They gave the prince the best of the three horses, a big grey gelding so pale that he was almost white. Griff and Haldon rode beside him on lesser mounts. The road ran south beneath the high white walls of Volon Therys for a good half mile. Then they left the town behind, following the winding course of the Rhoyme through willow groves and poppy fields and past a tall wooden windmill whose blades creaked like old bones as they turned.

They found the Golden Company beside the river as the sun was lowering in the west. It was a camp that even Arthur Dayne might have approved of—compact, orderly, defensible. A deep ditch had been dug around it, with sharpened stakes inside. The tents stood in rows, with broad avenues between them. The latrines had been placed beside the river, so the current would wash away the wastes. The horse lines were to the north, and beyond them, two dozen elephants grazed beside the water, pulling up reeds with their trunks. Griff glanced at the great grey beasts with approval. *There is not a warhorse in all of Westeros that will stand against them.*

Tall battle standards of cloth-of-gold flapped atop lofty poles along the perimeters of the camp. Beneath them, armed and armored sentries walked their rounds with spears and crossbows, watching every approach. Griff had feared that the company might have grown lax under Harry Strickland, who had always seemed more concerned with making friends than enforcing discipline; but it would seem his worries had been misplaced.

At the gate, Haldon said something to the serjeant of guards, and a runner was sent off to find a captain. When he turned up, he was just as ugly as the last time Griff laid eyes on him. A big-bellied, shambling hulk of a man, the sellsword had a seamed face crisscrossed with old scars. His right ear looked as if a dog had chewed on it and his left was missing. “Have they made *you* a captain, Flowers?” Griff said. “I thought the Golden Company had standards.”

“It’s worse than that, you bugger,” said Franklyn Flowers. “They knighted me as well.” He clasped Griff by the forearm, pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. “You look awful, even for a man’s been dead a dozen years. Blue hair, is it? When Harry said you’d be turning up, I almost shit myself. And Haldon, you icy cunt, good to see you too. Still have that stick up your arse?” He turned to Young Griff. “And this would be ...”

“My squire. Lad, this is Franklyn Flowers.”

The prince acknowledged him with a nod. “Flowers is a bastard name. You’re from the Reach.”

“Aye. My mother was a washerwoman at Cider Hall till one of milord’s sons raped her. Makes me a sort o’ brown apple Fossoway, the way I see it.” Flowers waved them through the gate. “Come with me. Strickland’s called all the officers to his tent. War council. The bloody Volantenes are rattling their spears and demanding to know our intentions.”

The men of the Golden Company were outside their tents, dicing, drinking, and swatting away flies. Griff wondered how many of them knew who he was. *Few enough. Twelve years is a long time.* Even the men who’d ridden with him might not recognize the exile lord Jon Connington of the fiery red beard in the lined, clean-shaved face and dyed blue hair of the sellsword

Griff. So far as most of them were concerned, Connington had drunk himself to death in Lys after being driven from the company in disgrace for stealing from the war chest. The shame of the lie still stuck in his craw, but Varys had insisted it was necessary. “We want no songs about the gallant exile,” the eunuch had tittered, in that mincing voice of his. “Those who die heroic deaths are long remembered, thieves and drunks and cravens soon forgotten.”

What does a eunuch know of a man's honor? Griff had gone along with the Spider's scheme for the boy's sake, but that did not mean he liked it any better. *Let me live long enough to see the boy sit the Iron Throne, and Varys will pay for that slight and so much more. Then we'll see who's soon forgotten.*

The captain-general's tent was made of cloth-of-gold and surrounded by a ring of pikes topped with gilded skulls. One skull was larger than the rest, grotesquely malformed. Below it was a second, no larger than a child's fist. *Maelys the Monstrous and his nameless brother.* The other skulls had a sameness to them, though several had been cracked and splintered by the blows that had slain them, and one had filed, pointed teeth. “Which one is Myles?” Griff found himself asking.

“There. On the end.” Flowers pointed. “Wait. I'll go announce you.” He slipped inside the tent, leaving Griff to contemplate the gilded skull of his old friend. In life, Ser Myles Toyne had been ugly as sin. His famous forebear, the dark and dashing Terrence Toyne of whom the singers sang, had been so fair of face that even the king's mistress could not resist him; but Myles had been possessed of jug ears, a crooked jaw, and the biggest nose that Jon Connington had ever seen. When he smiled at you, though, none of that mattered. Blackheart, his men had named him, for the sigil on his shield. Myles had loved the name and all it hinted at. “A captain-general should be feared, by friend and foe alike,” he had once confessed. “If men think me cruel, so much the better.” The truth was otherwise. Soldier to the bone, Toyne was fierce but always fair, a father to his men and always generous to the exile lord Jon Connington.

Death had robbed him of his ears, his nose, and all his warmth. The smile remained, transformed into a glittering golden grin. All the skulls were

grinning, even Bittersteel's on the tall pike in the center. *What does he have to grin about? He died defeated and alone, a broken man in an alien land.* On his deathbed, Ser Aegor Rivers had famously commanded his men to boil the flesh from his skull, dip it in gold, and carry it before them when they crossed the sea to retake Westeros. His successors had followed his example.

Jon Connington might have been one of those successors if his exile had gone otherwise. He had spent five years with the company, rising from the ranks to a place of honor at Toyne's right hand. Had he stayed, it might well have been him the men turned to after Myles died, instead of Harry Strickland. But Griff did not regret the path he'd chosen. *When I return to Westeros, it will not be as a skull atop a pole.*

Flowers stepped out of the tent. "Go on in."

The high officers of the Golden Company rose from stools and camp chairs as they entered. Old friends greeted Griff with smiles and embraces, the new men more formally. *Not all of them are as glad to see us as they would have me believe.* He sensed knives behind some of the smiles. Until quite recently, most of them had believed that Lord Jon Connington was safely in his grave, and no doubt many felt that was a fine place for him, a man who would steal from his brothers-in-arms. Griff might have felt the same way in their place.

Ser Franklyn did the introductions. Some of the sellsword captains bore bastard names, as Flowers did: Rivers, Hill, Stone. Others claimed names that had once loomed large in the histories of the Seven Kingdoms; Griff counted two Strongs, three Peakes, a Mudd, a Mandrake, a Lothston, a pair of Coles. Not all were genuine, he knew. In the free companies, a man could call himself whatever he chose. By any name, the sellswords displayed a rude splendor. Like many in their trade, they kept their worldly wealth upon their persons: jeweled swords, inlaid armor, heavy torcs, and fine silks were much in evidence, and every man there wore a lord's ransom in golden arm rings. Each ring signified one year's service with the Golden Company. Marq Mandrake, whose pox-scarred face had a hole in one cheek where a slave's mark had been burned away, wore a chain of golden skulls as well.

Not every captain was of Westerosi blood. Black Balaq, a white-haired Summer Islander with skin dark as soot, commanded the company's archers, as in Blackheart's day. He wore a feathered cloak of green and orange, magnificent to behold. The cadaverous Volantene, Gorys Edoryen, had replaced Strickland as paymaster. A leopard skin was draped across one shoulder, and hair as red as blood tumbled to his shoulders in oiled ringlets though his pointed beard was black. The spymaster was new to Griff, a Lyseni named Lysono Maar, with lilac eyes and white-gold hair and lips that would have been the envy of a whore. At first glance, Griff had almost taken him for a woman. His fingernails were painted purple, and his earlobes dripped with pearls and amethysts.

Ghosts and liars, Griff thought, as he surveyed their faces. Revenants from forgotten wars, lost causes, failed rebellions, a brotherhood of the failed and the fallen, the disgraced and the disinherited. This is my army. This is our best hope.

He turned to Harry Strickland.

Homeless Harry looked little like a warrior. Portly, with a big round head, mild grey eyes, and thinning hair that he brushed sideways to conceal a bald spot, Strickland sat in a camp chair soaking his feet in a tub of salt water. "You will pardon me if I do not rise," he said by way of greeting. "Our march was wearisome, and my toes are prone to blisters. It is a curse."

It is a mark of weakness. You sound like an old woman. The Stricklands had been part of the Golden Company since its founding, Harry's great-grandfather having lost his lands when he rose with the Black Dragon during the first Blackfyre Rebellion. "Gold for four generations," Harry would boast, as if four generations of exile and defeat were something to take pride in.

"I can make you an ointment for that," said Haldon, "and there are certain mineral salts that will toughen your skin."

"That is kind of you." Strickland beckoned to his squire. "Watkyn, wine for our friends."

“Thank you, but no,” said Griff. “We will drink water.”

“As you prefer.” The captain-general smiled up at the prince. “And this must be your son.”

Does he know? Griff wondered. *How much did Myles tell him?* Varys had been adamant about the need for secrecy. The plans that he and Illyrio had made with Blackheart had been known to them alone. The rest of the company had been left ignorant. What they did not know they could not let slip.

That time was done, though. “No man could have asked for a worthier son,” Griff said, “but the lad is not of my blood, and his name is not Griff. My lords, I give you Aegon Targaryen, firstborn son of Rhaegar, Prince of Dragonstone, by Princess Elia of Dorne ... soon, with your help, to be Aegon, the Sixth of His Name, King of Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Silence greeted his announcement. Someone cleared his throat. One of the Coles refilled his wine cup from the flagon. Gorys Edoryen played with one of his corkscrew ringlets and murmured something in a tongue Griff did not know. Laswell Peake coughed, Mandrake and Lothston exchanged a glance. *They know*, Griff realized then. *They have known all along.* He turned to look at Harry Strickland. “When did you tell them?”

The captain-general wriggled his blistered toes in his footbath. “When we reached the river. The company was restless, with good reason. We walked away from an easy campaign in the Disputed Lands, and for what? So we could swelter in this god-awful heat watching our coins melt away and our blades go to rust whilst I turn away rich contracts?”

That news made Griff’s skin crawl. “Who?”

“The Yunkishmen. The envoy that they sent to woo Volantis has already dispatched three free companies to Slaver’s Bay. He wishes us to be the fourth and offers twice what Myr was paying us, plus a slave for every man in the company, ten for every officer, and a hundred choice maidens all for me.”

Bloody hell. “That would require thousands of slaves. Where do the Yunkishmen expect to find so many?”

“In Meereen.” Strickland beckoned to his squire. “Watkyn, a towel. This water’s growing cool, and my toes have wrinkled up like raisins. No, not that towel, the soft one.”

“You refused him,” said Griff. “I told him I would think on his proposal.” Harry winced as his squire towed his feet. “Gentle with the toes. Think of them as thin-skinned grapes, lad. You want to dry them without crushing them. *Pat*, do not scrub. Yes, like that.” He turned back to Griff. “A blunt refusal would have been unwise. The men might rightly ask if I had taken leave of my wits.”

“You will have work for your blades soon enough.”

“Will we?” asked Lysono Maar. “I assume you know that the Targaryen girl has not started for the west?”

“We heard that tale in Selhorys.”

“No tale. Simple truth. The why of it is harder to grasp. Sack Meereen, aye, why not? I would have done the same in her place. The slaver cities reek of gold, and conquest requires coin. But why linger? Fear? Madness? Sloth?”

“The why of it does not matter.” Harry Strickland unrolled a pair of striped woolen stockings. “She is in Meereen and we are here, where the Volantenes grow daily more unhappy with our presence. We came to raise up a king and queen who would lead us home to Westeros, but this Targaryen girl seems more intent on planting olive trees than in reclaiming her father’s throne. Meanwhile, her foes gather. Yunkai, New Ghis, Tolos. Bloodbeard and the Tattered Prince will both be in the field against her ... and soon enough the fleets of Old Volantis will descend on her as well. What does she have? Bedslaves with sticks?”

“Unsullied,” said Griff. “And dragons.”

“Dragons, aye,” the captain-general said, “but young ones, hardly more than hatchlings.” Strickland eased his sock over his blisters and up his ankle. “How much will they avail her when all these armies close about her city like a fist?”

Tristan Rivers drummed his fingers on his knee. “All the more reason that we must reach her quickly, I say. If Daenerys will not come to us, we must go to Daenerys.”

“Can we walk across the waves, ser?” asked Lysono Maar. “I tell you again, we cannot reach the silver queen by sea. I slipped into Volantis myself, posing as a trader, to learn how many ships might be available to us. The harbor teems with galleys, cogs, and carracks of every sort and size, yet even so I soon found myself consorting with smugglers and pirates. We have ten thousand men in the company, as I am sure Lord Connington remembers from his years of service with us. Five hundred knights, each with three horses. Five hundred squires, with one mount apiece. And elephants, we must not forget the elephants. A pirate ship will not suffice. We would need a pirate *fleet* ... and even if we found one, the word has come back from Slaver’s Bay that Meereen has been closed off by blockade.”

“We could feign acceptance of the Yunkish offer,” urged Gorys Edoryen. “Allow the Yunkai’i to transport us to the east, then return their gold beneath the walls of Meereen.”

“One broken contract is stain enough upon the honor of the company.” Homeless Harry Strickland paused with his blistered foot in hand. “Let me remind you, it was Myles Toyne who put his seal to this secret pact, not me. I would honor his agreement if I could, but how? It seems plain to me that the Targaryen girl is never coming west. Westeros was her father’s kingdom. Meereen is hers. If she can break the Yunkai’i, she’ll be Queen of Slaver’s Bay. If not, she’ll die long before we could hope to reach her.”

His words came as no surprise to Griff. Harry Strickland had always been a genial man, better at hammering out contracts than at hammering on foes. He had a nose for gold, but whether he had the belly for battle was another question.

“There is the land route,” suggested Franklyn Flowers. “The demon road is death. We will lose half the company to desertion if we attempt that march, and bury half of those who remain beside the road. It grieves me to say it, but Magister Illyrio and his friends may have been unwise to put so much hope on this child queen.”

No, thought Griff, *but they were most unwise to put their hopes on you*. And then Prince Aegon spoke. “Then put your hopes on me,” he said. “Daenerys is Prince Rhaegar’s sister, but I am Rhaegar’s son. I am the only dragon that you need.”

Griff put a black-gloved hand upon Prince Aegon’s shoulder. “Spoken boldly,” he said, “but think what you are saying.”

“I have,” the lad insisted. “Why should I go running to my aunt as if I were a beggar? My claim is better than her own. Let her come to me ... in Westeros.”

Franklyn Flowers laughed. “I like it. Sail west, not east. Leave the little queen to her olives and seat Prince Aegon upon the Iron Throne. The boy has stones, give him that.”

The captain-general looked as if someone had slapped his face. “Has the sun curdled your brains, Flowers? We need the girl. We need the marriage. If Daenerys accepts our princeling and takes him for her consort, the Seven Kingdoms will do the same. Without her, the lords will only mock his claim and brand him a fraud and a pretender. And how do you propose to get to Westeros? You heard Lysono. There are no ships to be had.”

This man is afraid to fight, Griff realized. *How could they have chosen him to take the Blackheart’s place?* “No ships for Slaver’s Bay. Westeros is another matter. The east is closed to us, not the sea. The triarchs would be glad to see the back of us, I do not doubt. They might even help us arrange passage back to the Seven Kingdoms. No city wants an army on its doorstep.”

“He’s not wrong,” said Lysono Maar. “By now the lion surely has the dragon’s scent,” said one of the Coles, “but Cersei’s attentions will be fixed

upon Meereen and this other queen. She knows nothing of our prince. Once we land and raise our banners, many and more will flock to join us.”

“Some,” allowed Homeless Harry, “not *many*. Rhaegar’s sister has *dragons*. Rhaegar’s son does not. We do not have the strength to take the realm without Daenerys and her army. Her Unsullied.”

“The first Aegon took Westeros without eunuchs,” said Lysono Maar. “Why shouldn’t the sixth Aegon do the same?”

“The plan—”

“Which plan?” said Tristan Rivers. “The fat man’s plan? The one that changes every time the moon turns? First *Viserys* Targaryen was to join us with fifty thousand Dothraki screamers at his back. Then the Beggar King was dead, and it was to be the sister, a pliable young child queen who was on her way to Pentos with three new-hatched dragons. Instead the girl turns up on Slaver’s Bay and leaves a string of burning cities in her wake, and the fat man decides we should meet her by Volantis. Now that plan is in ruins as well.

“I have had enough of Illyrio’s plans. Robert Baratheon won the Iron Throne without the benefit of dragons. We can do the same. And if I am wrong and the realm does not rise for us, we can always retreat back across the narrow sea, as Bittersteel once did, and others after him.”

Strickland shook his head stubbornly. “The risk—”

“—is not what it was, now that Tywin Lannister is dead. The Seven Kingdoms will never be more ripe for conquest. Another boy king sits the Iron Throne, this one even younger than the last, and rebels are thick upon the ground as autumn leaves.”

“Even so,” said Strickland, “alone, we cannot hope to—”

Griff had heard enough of the captain-general’s cowardice. “We will not be alone. Dorne will join us, *must* join us. Prince Aegon is Elia’s son as well as Rhaegar’s.”

“That’s so,” the boy said, “and who is there left in Westeros to oppose us? A woman.”

“A *Lannister* woman,” insisted the captain-general. “The bitch will have the Kingslayer at her side, count on that, and they will have all the wealth of Casterly Rock behind them. And Illyrio says this boy king is betrothed to the Tyrell girl, which means we must face the power of High-garden as well.”

Laswell Peake rapped his knuckles on the table. “Even after a century, some of us still have friends in the Reach. The power of Highgarden may not be what Mace Tyrell imagines.”

“Prince Aegon,” said Tristan Rivers, “we are your men. Is this your wish, that we sail west instead of east?”

“It is,” Aegon replied eagerly. “If my aunt wants Meereen, she’s welcome to it. I will claim the Iron Throne by myself, with your swords and your allegiance. Move fast and strike hard, and we can win some easy victories before the Lannisters even know that we have landed. That will bring others to our cause.”

Rivers was smiling in approval. Others traded thoughtful looks. Then Peake said, “I would sooner die in Westeros than on the demon road,” and Marq Mandrake chuckled and responded, “Me, I’d sooner live, win lands and some great castle,” and Franklyn Flowers slapped his sword hilt and said, “So long as I can kill some Fossoways, I’m for it.”

When all of them began to speak at once, Griff knew the tide had turned. *This is a side of Aegon I never saw before.* It was not the prudent course, but he was tired of prudence, sick of secrets, weary of waiting. Win or lose, he would see Griffin’s Roost again before he died, and be buried in the tomb beside his father’s.

One by one, the men of the Golden Company rose, knelt, and laid their swords at the feet of his young prince. The last to do so was Homeless Harry Strickland, blistered feet and all.

The sun was reddening the western sky and painting scarlet shadows on the golden skulls atop their spears when they took their leave of the captain-general's tent. Franklyn Flowers offered to take the prince around the camp and introduce him to some of what he called *the lads*. Griff gave his consent. "But remember, so far as the company is concerned, he must remain Young Griff until we cross the narrow sea. In Westeros we'll wash his hair and let him don his armor."

"Aye, understood." Flowers clapped a hand on Young Griff's back. "With me. We'll start with the cooks. Good men to know."

When they were gone, Griff turned to the Halfmaester. "Ride back to the *Shy Maid* and return with Lady Lemore and Ser Rolly. We'll need Illyrio's chests as well. All the coin, and the armor. Give Yandry and Ysilla our thanks. Their part in this is done. They will not be forgotten when His Grace comes into his kingdom."

"As you command, my lord."

Griff left him there, and slipped inside the tent that Homeless Harry had assigned him.

The road ahead was full of perils, he knew, but what of it? All men must die. All he asked was time. He had waited so long, surely the gods would grant him a few more years, enough time to see the boy he'd called a son seated on the Iron Throne. To reclaim his lands, his name, his honor. To still the bells that rang so loudly in his dreams whenever he closed his eyes to sleep.

Alone in the tent, as the gold and scarlet rays of the setting sun shone through the open flap, Jon Connington shrugged off his wolfskin cloak, slipped his mail shirt off over his head, settled on a camp stool, and peeled the glove from his right hand. The nail on his middle finger had turned as black as jet, he saw, and the grey had crept up almost to the first knuckle. The tip of his ring finger had begun to darken too, and when he touched it with the point of his dagger, he felt nothing.

Death, he knew, but slow. I still have time. A year. Two years. Five. Some stone men live for ten. Time enough to cross the sea, to see Griffin's Roost again. To end the Usurper's line for good and all, and put Rhaegar's son upon the Iron Throne.

Then Lord Jon Connington could die content.