

TYRION

The healer entered the tent murmuring pleasantries, but one sniff of the foul air and a glance at Yezzan zo Qaggaz put an end to that. “The pale mare,” the man told Sweets.

What a surprise, Tyrion thought. Who could have guessed? Aside from any man with a nose and me with half of one. Yezzan was burning with fever, squirming fitfully in a pool of his own excrement. His shit had turned to brown slime streaked with blood ... and it fell to Yollo and Penny to wipe his yellow bottom clean. Even with assistance, their master could not lift his own weight; it took all his failing strength to roll onto one side.

“My arts will not avail here,” the healer announced. “The noble Yezzan’s life is in the hands of the gods. Keep him cool if you can. Some say that helps. Bring him water.” Those afflicted by the pale mare were always thirsty, drinking gallons between their shits. “Clean fresh water, as much as he will drink.”

“Not river water,” said Sweets. “By no means.” And with that, the healer fled.

We need to flee as well, thought Tyrion. He was a slave in a golden collar, with little bells that tinkled cheerfully with every step he took. *One of Yezzan’s special treasures. An honor indistinguishable from a death warrant.* Yezzan zo Qaggaz liked to keep his darlings close, so it had fallen to Yollo and Penny and Sweets and his other treasures to attend him when he grew sick.

Poor old Yezzan. The lord of suet was not so bad as masters went. Sweets had been right about that. Serving at his nightly banquets, Tyrion had soon learned that Yezzan stood foremost amongst those Yunkish lords who favored honoring the peace with Meereen. Most of the others were only biding their time, waiting for the armies of Volantis to arrive. A few wanted to assault the city immediately, lest the Volantenes rob them of their glory and the best part of the plunder. Yezzan would have no part of that. Nor

would he consent to returning Meereen's hostages by way of trebuchet, as the sellsword Bloodbeard had proposed.

But much and more can change in two days. Two days ago Nurse had been hale and healthy. Two days ago Yezzan had not heard the pale mare's ghostly hoofbeats. Two days ago the fleets of Old Volantis had been two days farther off. And now ...

"Is Yezzan going to die?" Penny asked, in that please-say-it-is-not-so voice of hers.

"We are all going to die."

"Of the flux, I meant."

Sweets gave them both a desperate look. "Yezzan *must not* die." The hermaphrodite stroked the brow of their gargantuan master, pushing back his sweat-damp hair. The Yunkishman moaned, and another flood of brown water gushed down his legs. His bedding was stained and stinking, but they had no way to move him.

"Some masters free their slaves when they die," said Penny.

Sweets tittered. It was a ghastly sound. "Only favorites. They free them from the woes of the world, to accompany their beloved master to the grave and serve him in the afterlife."

Sweets should know. His will be the first throat slit.

The goat boy spoke up. "The silver queen—"

"—is dead," insisted Sweets. "Forget her! The dragon took her across the river. She's drowned in that Dothraki sea."

"You can't drown in *grass*," the goat boy said. "If we were free," said Penny, "we could find the queen. Or go search for her, at least."

You on your dog and me on my sow, chasing a dragon across the Dothraki sea. Tyrion scratched his scar to keep from laughing. "This particular

dragon has already evinced a fondness for roast pork. And roast dwarf is twice as tasty.”

“It was just a wish,” said Penny wistfully. “We could sail away. There are ships again, now that the war is over.”

Is it? Tyrion was inclined to doubt that. Parchments had been signed, but wars were not fought on parchments.

“We could sail to Qarth,” Penny went on. “The streets are paved with jade there, my brother always said. The city walls are one of the wonders of the world. When we perform in Qarth, gold and silver will rain down on us, you’ll see.”

“Some of those ships out on the bay are Qartheen,” Tyrion reminded her. “Lomas Longstrider saw the walls of Qarth. His books suffice for me. I have gone as far east as I intend to go.”

Sweets dabbed at Yezzan’s fevered face with a damp cloth. “Yezzan must live. Or we all die with him. The pale mare does not carry off every rider. The master will recover.”

That was a bald-faced lie. It would be a wonder if Yezzan lived another day. The lord of suet was already dying from whatever hideous disease he had brought back from Sothoryos, it seemed to Tyrion. This would just hasten his end. *A mercy, really.* But not the sort the dwarf craved for himself. “The healer said he needs fresh water. We will see to that.”

“That is good of you.” Sweets sounded numb. It was more than just fear of having her throat cut; alone amongst Yezzan’s treasures, she actually seemed fond of their immense master.

“Penny, come with me.” Tyrion opened the tent flap and ushered her out into the heat of a Meereenese morning. The air was muggy and oppressive, yet still a welcome relief from the miasma of sweat, shit, and sickness that filled the inside of Yezzan’s palatial pavilion.

“Water will help the master,” Penny said. “That’s what the healer said, it must be so. Sweet fresh water.”

“Sweet fresh water didn’t help Nurse.” *Poor old Nurse.* Yezzan’s soldiers had tossed him onto the corpse wagon last night at dusk, another victim of the pale mare. When men are dying every hour, no one looks too hard at one more dead man, especially one as well despised as Nurse. Yezzan’s other slaves had refused to go near the overseer once the cramps began, so it was left to Tyrion to keep him warm and bring him drinks. *Watered wine and lemonsweet and some nice hot dogtail soup, with slivers of mushroom in the broth. Drink it down, Nursey, that shitwater squirting from your arse needs to be replaced.* The last word Nurse ever said was, “No.” The last words he ever heard were, “A Lannister always pays his debts.”

Tyrion had kept the truth of that from Penny, but she needed to understand how things stood with their master. “If Yezzan lives to see the sunrise, I’ll be stunned.”

She clutched his arm. “What will happen to us?”

“He has heirs. Nephews.” Four such had come with Yezzan from Yunkai to command his slave soldiers. One was dead, slain by Targaryen sellswords during a sortie. The other three would divide the yellow enormity’s slaves amongst them, like as not. Whether any of the nephews shared Yezzan’s fondness for cripples, freaks, and grotesques was far less certain. “One of them may inherit us. Or we could end up back on the auction block.”

“No.” Her eyes got big. “Not that. Please.”

“It is not a prospect I relish either.”

A few yards away, six of Yezzan’s slave soldiers were squatting in the dust, throwing the bones and passing a wineskin from hand to hand. One was the serjeant called Scar, a black-tempered brute with a head as smooth as stone and the shoulders of an ox. *Clever as an ox too,* Tyrion recalled.

He waddled toward them. “Scar,” he barked out, “the noble Yezzan has need of fresh, clean water. Take two men and bring back as many pails as

you can carry. And be quick about it.”

The soldiers broke off their game. Scar rose to his feet, brow beetling. “What did you say, dwarf? Who do you think you are?”

“You know who I am. Yollo. One of our lord’s treasures. Now do as I told you.”

The soldiers laughed. “Go on, Scar,” one mocked, “and be quick about it. Yezzan’s monkey gave you a command.”

“You do *not* tell soldiers what to do,” Scar said. “Soldiers?” Tyrion affected puzzlement. “Slaves, is what I see. You wear a collar round your neck the same as me.”

The savage backhand blow Scar dealt him knocked him to the ground and broke his lip. “Yezzan’s collar. Not yours.”

Tyrion wiped the blood from his split lip with the back of his hand. When he tried to rise, one leg went out from under him, and he stumbled back onto his knees. He needed Penny’s help to regain his feet. “Sweets said the master must have water,” he said in his best whine.

“Sweets can go fuck himself. He’s made for it. We don’t take commands from that freak neither.”

No, thought Tyrion. Even amongst slaves there were lords and peasants, as he had been quick to learn. The hermaphrodite had long been their master’s special pet, indulged and favored, and the noble Yezzan’s other slaves hated him for it.

The soldiers were accustomed to taking their commands from their masters and their overseer. But Nurse was dead and Yezzan too sick to name a successor. As for the three nephews, those brave free men had remembered urgent business elsewhere at the first sound of the pale mare’s hooves.

“The w-water,” said Tyrion, cringing. “Not river water, the healer said. Clean, fresh well water.”

Scar grunted. “*You* go for it. And be quick about it.”

“Us?” Tyrion exchanged a hopeless glance with Penny. “Water’s heavy. We’re not so strong as you. Can we ... can we take the mule cart?”

“Take your legs.”

“We’ll need to make a dozen trips.”

“Make a hundred trips. It’s no shit to me.”

“Just the two of us ... we won’t be able to carry all the water that the master needs.”

“Take your bear,” suggested Scar. “Fetching water is about all that one is good for.”

Tyrion backed away. “As you say, master.”

Scar grinned. *Master: Oh, he liked that.* “Morgo, bring the keys. You fill the pails and come right back, dwarf. You know what happens to slaves who try to escape.”

“Bring the pails,” Tyrion told Penny. He went off with the man Morgo to fetch Ser Jorah Mormont from his cage.

The knight had not adapted well to bondage. When called upon to play the bear and carry off the maiden fair, he had been sullen and uncooperative, shuffling lifelessly through his paces when he deigned to take part in their mummary at all. Though he had not attempted escape, nor offered violence to his captors, he would ignore their commands oft as not or reply with muttered curses. None of this had amused Nurse, who made his displeasure clear by confining Mormont in an iron cage and having him beaten every evening as the sun sank into Slaver’s Bay. The knight absorbed the beatings silently; the only sounds were the muttered curses of the slaves who beat him and the dull *thuds* of their clubs pounding against Ser Jorah’s bruised and battered flesh.

The man is a shell, Tyrion thought, the first time he saw the big knight beaten. I should have held my tongue and let Zahrina have him. It might have been a kinder fate than this.

Mormont emerged from the cramped confines of the cage bent and squinting, with both eyes blackened and his back crusty with dried blood. His face was so bruised and swollen that he hardly looked human. He was naked except for a breechclout, a filthy bit of yellow rag. “You’re to help them carry water,” Morgo told him.

Ser Jorah’s only reply was a sullen stare. *Some men would sooner die free than live a slave, I suppose.* Tyrion was not stricken with that affliction himself, thankfully, but if Mormont murdered Morgo, the other slaves might not draw that distinction. “Come,” he said, before the knight did something brave and stupid. He waddled off and hoped Mormont would follow.

The gods were good for once. Mormont followed.

Two pails for Penny, two for Tyrion, and four for Ser Jorah, two in either hand. The nearest well was south and west of the Harridan, so they set off in that direction, the bells on their collars ringing merrily with every step. No one paid them any mind. They were just slaves fetching water for their master. Wearing a collar conferred certain advantages, particularly a gilded collar inscribed with the name of Yezzan zo Qaggaz. The chime of those little bells proclaimed their value to anyone with ears. A slave was only as important as his master; Yezzan was the richest man in the Yellow City and had brought six hundred slave soldiers to the war, even if he did look like a monstrous yellow slug and smell of piss. Their collars gave them leave to go anywhere they might wish within the camp.

Until Yezzan dies.

The Clanker Lords had their slave soldiers drilling in the nearest field. The clatter of the chains that bound them made a harsh metallic music as they marched across the sand in lockstep and formed up with their long spears. Elsewhere teams of slaves were raising ramps of stone and sand beneath their mangonels and scorpions, angling them upward at the sky, the better to

defend the camp should the black dragon return. It made the dwarf smile to see them sweating and cursing as they wrestled the heavy machines onto the inclines. Crossbows were much in evidence as well. Every other man seemed to be clutching one, with a quiverfull of bolts hanging from his hip.

If anyone had thought to ask him, Tyrion could have told them not to bother. Unless one of those long iron scorpion bolts chanced to find an eye, the queen's pet monster was not like to be brought down by such toys.

Dragons are not so easy to kill as that. Tickle him with these and you'll only make him angry.

The eyes were where a dragon was most vulnerable. The eyes, and the brain behind them. Not the underbelly, as certain old tales would have it. The scales there were just as tough as those along a dragon's back and flanks. And not down the gullet either. That was madness. These would-be dragonslayers might as well try to quench a fire with a spear thrust. "Death comes out of the dragon's mouth," Septon Barth had written in his *Unnatural History*, "but death does not go in that way."

Farther on, two legions from New Ghis were facing off shield wall to shield wall whilst serjeants in iron halfhelms with horsehair crests screamed commands in their own incomprehensible dialect. To the naked eye the Ghiscari looked more formidable than the Yunkish slave soldiers, but Tyrion nursed doubts. The legionaries might be armed and organized in the same manner as Unsullied ... but the eunuchs knew no other life, whereas the Ghiscari were free citizens who served for three-year terms.

The line at the well stretched back a quarter mile.

There were only a handful of wells within a day's march of Meereen, so the wait was always long. Most of the Yunkish host drew their drinking water from the Skahazadhan, which Tyrion had known was a very bad idea even before the healer's warning. The clever ones took care to stay upstream of the latrines, but they were still downstream of the city.

The fact that there were any good wells at all within a day's march of the city only went to prove that Daenerys Targaryen was still an innocent where siegecraft was concerned. *She should have poisoned every well. Then all the*

Yunkishmen would be drinking from the river. See how long their siege lasts then. That was what his lord father would have done, Tyrion did not doubt.

Every time they shuffled forward another place, the bells on their collars tinkled brightly. *Such a happy sound, it makes me want to scoop out someone's eyeballs with a spoon.* By now Griff and Duck and Haldon Half-maester should be in Westeros with their young prince. *I should be with them ... but no, I had to have a whore. Kinslaying was not enough, I needed cunt and wine to seal my ruin, and here I am on the wrong side of the world, wearing a slave collar with little golden bells to announce my coming. If I dance just right, maybe I can ring "The Rains of Castamere."*

There was no better place to hear the latest news and rumors than around the well. "I know what I saw," an old slave in a rusted iron collar was saying, as Tyrion and Penny shuffled along in the queue, "and I saw that dragon ripping off arms and legs, tearing men in half, burning them down to ash and bones. People started running, trying to get out of that pit, but I come to see a show, and by all the gods of Ghis, I saw one. I was up in the purple, so I didn't think the dragon was like to trouble me."

"The queen climbed onto the dragon's back and flew away," insisted a tall brown woman.

"She tried," said the old man, "but she couldn't hold on. The cross-bows wounded the dragon, and the queen was struck right between her sweet pink teats, I hear. That was when she fell. She died in the gutter, crushed beneath a wagon's wheels. I know a girl who knows a man who saw her die."

In this company, silence was the better part of wisdom, but Tyrion could not help himself. "No corpse was found," he said.

The old man frowned. "What would you know about it?"

"They were there," said the brown woman. "It's them, the jousting dwarfs, the ones who tilted for the queen."

The old man squinted down as if seeing him and Penny for the first time. "You're the ones who rode the pigs."

Our notoriety precedes us. Tyrion sketched a courtly bow, and refrained from pointing out that one of the pigs was really a dog. “The sow I ride is actually my sister. We have the same nose, could you tell? A wizard cast a spell on her, but if you give her a big wet kiss, she will turn into a beautiful woman. The pity is, once you get to know her, you’ll want to kiss her again to turn her back.”

Laughter erupted all around them. Even the old man joined in. “You saw her, then,” said the redheaded boy behind them. “You saw the queen. Is she as beautiful as they say?”

I saw a slender girl with silvery hair wrapped in a tokar; he might have told them. Her face was veiled, and I never got close enough for a good look. I was riding on a pig. Daenerys Targaryen had been seated in the owner’s box beside her Ghiscari king, but Tyrion’s eyes had been drawn to the knight in the white-and-gold armor behind her. Though his features were concealed, the dwarf would have known Barristan Selmy anywhere. *Illyrio was right about that much, at least, he remembered thinking. Will Selmy know me, though? And what will he do if he does?*

He had almost revealed himself then and there, but something stopped him—caution, cowardice, instinct, call it what you will. He could not imagine Barristan the Bold greeting him with anything but hostility. Selmy had never approved of Jaime’s presence in his precious Kingsguard. Before the rebellion, the old knight thought him too young and untried; afterward, he had been known to say that the Kingslayer should exchange that white cloak for a black one. And his own crimes were worse. Jaime had killed a madman. Tyrion had put a quarrel through the groin of his own sire, a man Ser Barristan had known and served for years. He might have chanced it all the same, but then Penny had landed a blow on his shield and the moment was gone, never to return.

“The queen watched us tilt,” Penny was telling the other slaves in line, “but that was the only time we saw her.”

“You must have seen the dragon,” said the old man.

Would that we had. The gods had not even vouchsafed him that much. As Daenerys Targaryen was taking wing, Nurse had been clapping irons round their ankles to make certain they would not attempt escape on their way back to their master. If the overseer had only taken his leave after delivering them to the abbatoir, or fled with the rest of the slavers when the dragon descended from the sky, the two dwarfs might have strolled away free. *Or run away, more like, our little bells a-jingle.*

“Was there a dragon?” Tyrion said with a shrug. “All I know is that no dead queens were found.”

The old man was not convinced. “Ah, they found corpses by the hundred. They dragged them inside the pit and burned them, though half was crisp already. Might be they didn’t know her, burned and bloody and crushed. Might be they did but decided to say otherwise, to keep you slaves quiet.”

“*Us* slaves?” said the brown woman. “You wear a collar too.”

“*Ghazdor’s* collar,” the old man boasted. “Known him since we was born. I’m almost like a brother to him. Slaves like you, sweepings out of Astapor and Yunkai, you whine about being free, but I wouldn’t give the dragon queen my collar if she offered to suck my cock for it. Man has the right master, that’s better.”

Tyrion did not dispute him. The most insidious thing about bondage was how easy it was to grow accustomed to it. The life of most slaves was not all that different from the life of a serving man at Casterly Rock, it seemed to him. True, some slaveowners and their overseers were brutal and cruel, but the same was true of some Westerosi lords and their stewards and bailiffs. Most of the Yunkai’i treated their chattels decently enough, so long as they did their jobs and caused no trouble ... and this old man in his rusted collar, with his fierce loyalty to Lord Wobblecheeks, his owner, was not at all atypical.

“Ghazdor the Great-hearted?” Tyrion said, sweetly. “Our master Yezzan has often spoken of his wits.” What Yezzan had actually said was on the order of, *I have more wits in the left cheek of my arse than Ghazdor and his brothers have between them.* He thought it prudent to omit the actual words.

Midday had come and gone before he and Penny reached the well, where a scrawny one-legged slave was drawing water. He squinted at them suspiciously. “Nurse always comes for Yezzan’s water, with four men and a mule cart.” He dropped the bucket down the well once more. There was a soft *splash*. The one-legged man let the bucket fill, then began to draw it upward. His arms were sunburnt and peeling, scrawny to look at but all muscle.

“The mule died,” said Tyrion. “So did Nurse, poor man. And now Yezzan himself has mounted the pale mare, and six of his soldiers have the shits. May I have two pails full?”

“As you like.” That was the end of idle talk. *Is that hoofbeats you hear?* The lie about the soldiers got old one-leg moving much more quickly.

They started back, each of the dwarfs carrying two brim-full pails of sweet water and Ser Jorah with two pails in each hand. The day was growing hotter, the air as thick and wet as damp wool, and the pails seemed to grow heavier with every step. *A long walk on short legs*. Water sloshed from his pails with every stride, splashing round his legs, whilst his bells played a marching song. *Had I known it would come to this, Father, I might have let you live*. Half a mile east, a dark plume of smoke was rising where a tent had been set afire. *Burning last night’s dead*. “This way,” Tyrion said, jerking his head to the right.

Penny gave him a puzzled look. “That’s not how we came.”

“We don’t want to breathe that smoke. It’s full of malign humors.” It was not a lie. *Not entirely*.

Penny was soon puffing, struggling with the weight of her pails. “I need to rest.”

“As you wish.” Tyrion set the pails of water on the ground, grateful for the halt. His legs were cramping badly, so he found himself a likely rock and sat on it to rub his thighs.

“I could do that for you,” offered Penny. “I know where the knots are.” As fond as he had grown of the girl, it still made him uncomfortable when she touched him. He turned to Ser Jorah. “A few more beatings and you’ll be uglier than I am, Mormont. Tell me, is there any fight left in you?”

The big knight raised two blackened eyes and looked at him as he might look at a bug. “Enough to crack your neck, Imp.”

“Good.” Tyrion picked up his pails. “This way, then.”

Penny wrinkled her brow. “No. It’s to the left.” She pointed. “That’s the Harridan there.”

“And that’s the Wicked Sister.” Tyrion nodded in the other direction. “Trust me,” he said. “My way is quicker.” He set off, his bells jingling. Penny would follow, he knew.

Sometimes he envied the girl all her pretty little dreams. She reminded him of Sansa Stark, the child bride he had wed and lost. Despite the horrors Penny had suffered, she remained somehow trusting. *She should know better. She is older than Sansa. And she’s a dwarf. She acts as if she has forgotten that, as if she were highborn and fair to look upon, instead of a slave in a grotesquerie.* At night Tyrion would oft hear her praying. *A waste of words. If there are gods to listen, they are monstrous gods who torment us for their sport. Who else would make a world like this, so full of bondage, blood, and pain? Who else would shape us as they have?* Sometimes he wanted to slap her, shake her, scream at her, anything to wake her from her dreams. *No one is going to save us,* he wanted to scream at her. *The worst is yet to come.* Yet somehow he could never say the words. Instead of giving her a good hard crack across that ugly face of hers to knock the blinders from her eyes, he would find himself squeezing her shoulder or giving her a hug. *Every touch a lie. I have paid her so much false coin that she half thinks she’s rich.*

He had even kept the truth of Daznak’s Pit from her.

Lions. They were going to set lions on us. It would have been exquisitely ironic, that. Perhaps he would have had time for a short, bitter chortle

before being torn apart.

No one ever told him the end that had been planned for them, not in so many words, but it had not been hard to puzzle out, down beneath the bricks of Daznak's Pit, in the hidden world below the seats, the dark domain of the pit fighters and the serving men who tended to them, quick and dead—the cooks who fed them, the ironmongers who armed them, the barber-surgeons who bled them and shaved them and bound up their wounds, the whores who serviced them before and after fights, the corpse handlers who dragged the losers off the sands with chains and iron hooks.

Nurse's face had given Tyrion his first inkling. After their show, he and Penny had returned to the torchlit vault where the fighters gathered before and after their matches. Some sat sharpening their weapons; others sacrificed to queer gods, or dulled their nerves with milk of the poppy before going out to die. Those who'd fought and won were dicing in a corner, laughing as only men who have just faced death and lived can laugh.

Nurse was paying out some silver to a pit man on a lost wager when he spied Penny leading Crunch. The confusion in his eyes was gone in half a heartbeat, but not before Tyrion grasped what it meant. *Nurse did not expect us back.* He had looked around at other faces. *None of them expected us back. We were meant to die out there.* The final piece fell into place when he overheard an animal trainer complaining loudly to the pitmaster. "The lions are hungry. Two days since they ate. I was told not to feed them, and I haven't. The queen should pay for meat."

"You take that up with her the next time she holds court," the pitmaster threw back at him.

Even now, Penny did not suspect. When she spoke about the pit, her chief worry was that more people had not laughed. *They would have pissed themselves laughing if the lions had been loosed,* Tyrion almost told her. Instead he'd squeezed her shoulder.

Penny came to a sudden halt. "We're going the wrong way."

“We’re not.” Tyrion lowered his pails to the ground. The handles had gouged deep grooves in his fingers. “Those are the tents we want, there.”

“The Second Sons?” A queer smile split Ser Jorah’s face. “If you think to find help there, you don’t know Brown Ben Plumm.”

“Oh, I do. Plumm and I have played five games of *cyvasse*. Brown Ben is shrewd, tenacious, not unintelligent ... but wary. He likes to let his opponent take the risks whilst he sits back and keeps his options open, reacting to the battle as it takes shape.”

“Battle? What battle?” Penny backed away from him. “We have to get *back*. The master needs clean water. If we take too long, we’ll be whipped. And Pretty Pig and Crunch are there.”

“Sweets will see that they are taken care of,” Tyrion lied. More like, Scar and his friends would soon be feasting on ham and bacon and a savory dog stew, but Penny did not need to hear that. “Nurse is dead and Yezzan’s dying. It could be dark before anyone thinks to miss us. We will never have a better chance than now.”

“*No*. You know what they do when they catch slaves trying to escape. You *know*. Please. They’ll never let us leave the camp.”

“We haven’t left the camp.” Tyrion picked up his pails. He set off at a brisk waddle, never looking back. Mormont fell in beside him. After a moment he heard the sounds of Penny hurrying after him, down a sandy slope to a circle of ragged tents.

The first guard appeared as they neared the horse lines, a lean spear-man whose maroon beard marked him as Tyroshi. “What do we have here? And what have you got in those pails?”

“Water,” said Tyrion, “if it please you.”

“Beer would please me better.” A spearpoint pricked him in the back—a second guard, come up behind them. Tyrion could hear King’s Landing in his voice. *Scum from Flea Bottom*. “You lost, dwarf?” the guard demanded.

“We’re here to join your company.”

A pail slipped from Penny’s grasp and overturned. Half the water had spilled before she could right it once again.

“We got fools enough in this company. Why would we want three more?” The Tyroshi flicked at Tyrion’s collar with his spearpoint, ringing the little golden bell. “A runaway slave is what I see. Three runaway slaves. Whose collar?”

“The Yellow Whale’s.” That from a third man, drawn by their voices—a skinny stubble-jawed piece of work with teeth stained red from sourleaf. *A serjeant*, Tyrion knew, from the way the other two deferred to him. He had a hook where his right hand should have been. *Bronn’s meaner bastard shadow, or I’m Baelor the Beloved*. “These are the dwarfs Ben tried to buy,” the serjeant told the spearmen, squinting, “but the big one ... best bring him too. All three.”

The Tyroshi gestured with his spear. Tyrion moved along. The other sell sword—a stripling, hardly more than a boy, with fuzz on his cheeks and hair the color of dirty straw—scooped up Penny under one arm. “Ooh, mine has teats,” he said, laughing. He slipped a hand under Penny’s tunic, just to be sure.

“Just bring her,” snapped the serjeant.

The stripling slung Penny over one shoulder. Tyrion went ahead as quick as his stunted legs would allow. He knew where they were going: the big tent on the far side of the fire pit, its painted canvas walls cracked and faded by years of sun and rain. A few sellswords turned to watch them pass, and a camp follower sniggered, but no one moved to interfere.

Within the tent, they found camp stools and a trestle table, a rack of spears and halberds, a floor covered with threadbare carpets in half a dozen clashing colors, and three officers. One was slim and elegant, with a pointed beard, a bravo’s blade, and a slashed pink doublet. One was plump and balding, with ink stains on his fingers and a quill clutched in one hand.

The third was the man he sought. Tyrion bowed. “Captain.”

“We caught them creeping into camp.” The stripling dumped Penny onto the carpet.

“Runaways,” the Tyroshi declared. “With pails.”

“Pails?” said Brown Ben Plumm. When no one ventured to explain, he said, “Back to your posts, boys. And not a word o’ this, to anyone.” When they were gone, he smiled at Tyrion. “Come for another game of *cyvasse*, Yollo?”

“If you wish. I do enjoy defeating you. I hear you’re twice a turncloak, Plumm. A man after mine own heart.”

Brown Ben’s smile never reached his eyes. He studied Tyrion as a man might study a talking snake. “Why are you here?”

“To make your dreams come true. You tried to buy us at auction. Then you tried to win us at *cyvasse*. Even when I had my nose, I was not so handsome as to provoke such passion ... save in one who happened to know my true worth. Well, here I am, free for the taking. Now be a friend, send for your smith, and get these collars off us. I’m sick of tinkling when I tinkle.”

“I want no trouble with your noble master.”

“Yezzan has more urgent matters to concern him than three missing slaves. He’s riding the pale mare. And why should they think to look for us here? You have swords enough to discourage anyone who comes nosing round. A small risk for a great gain.”

The jackanapes in the slashed pink doublet hissed. “They’ve brought the sickness amongst us. Into our very tents.” He turned to Ben Plumm. “Shall I cut his head off, Captain? We can toss the rest in a latrine pit.” He drew a sword, a slender bravo’s blade with a jeweled hilt.

“Do be careful with my head,” said Tyrion. “You don’t want to get any of my blood on you. Blood carries the disease. And you’ll want to boil our

clothes, or burn them.”

“I’ve a mind to burn them with you still in them, Yollo.”

“That is not my name. But you know that. You have known that since you first set eyes on me.”

“Might be.”

“I know you as well, my lord,” said Tyrion. “You’re less purple and more brown than the Plumbs at home, but unless your name’s a lie, you’re a westerman, by blood if not by birth. House Plumm is sworn to Casterly Rock, and as it happens I know a bit of its history. Your branch sprouted from a stone spit across the narrow sea, no doubt. A younger son of Viserys Plumm, I’d wager. The queen’s dragons were fond of you, were they not?”

That seemed to amuse the sellsword. “Who told you that?”

“No one. Most of the stories you hear about dragons are fodder for fools. Talking dragons, dragons hoarding gold and gems, dragons with four legs and bellies big as elephants, dragons riddling with sphinxes ... nonsense, all of it. But there are truths in the old books as well. Not only do I know that the queen’s dragons took to you, but I know why.”

“My mother said my father had a drop of dragon blood.”

“Two drops. That, or a cock six feet long. You know that tale? I do. Now, you’re a clever Plumm, so you know this head of mine is worth a lordship ... back in Westeros, half a world away. By the time you get it there, only bone and maggots will remain. My sweet sister will deny the head is mine and cheat you of the promised reward. You know how it is with queens. Fickle cunts, the lot of them, and Cersei is the worst.”

Brown Ben scratched at his beard. “Could deliver you alive and wriggling, then. Or pop your head into a jar and pickle it.”

“Or throw in with me. That’s the wisest move.” He grinned. “I was born a second son. This company is my destiny. ”

“The Second Sons have no place for mummers,” the bravo in pink said scornfully. “It’s fighters we need.”

“I’ve brought you one.” Tyrion jerked a thumb at Mormont. “That creature?” The bravo laughed. “An ugly brute, but scars alone don’t make a Second Son.”

Tyrion rolled his mismatched eyes. “Lord Plumm, who are these two friends of yours? The pink one is annoying.”

The bravo curled a lip, whilst the fellow with the quill chuckled at his insolence. But it was Jorah Mormont who supplied their names. “Inkpots is the company paymaster. The peacock calls himself Kasporio the Cunning, though Kasporio the Cunt would be more apt. A nasty piece of work.”

Mormont’s face might have been unrecognizable in its battered state, but his voice was unchanged. Kasporio gave him a startled look, whilst the wrinkles around Plumm’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “Jorah *Mormont*? Is that you? Less proud than when you scampered off, though. Must we still call you *ser*?”

Ser Jorah’s swollen lips twisted into a grotesque grin. “Give me a sword and you can call me what you like, Ben.”

Kasporio edged backward. “You ... she sent you away ...”

“I came back. Call me a fool.”

A fool in love. Tyrion cleared his throat. “You can talk of old times later ... after I am done explaining why my head would be of more use to you upon my shoulders. You will find, Lord Plumm, that I can be very generous to my friends. If you doubt me, ask Bronn. Ask Shagga, son of Dolf. Ask Timett, son of Timett.”

“And who would they be?” asked the man called Inkpots. “Good men who pledged me their swords and prospered greatly by that service.” He shrugged. “Oh, very well, I lied about the ‘good’ part. They’re bloodthirsty bastards, like you lot.”

“Might be,” said Brown Ben. “Or might be you just made up some names. *Shagga*, did you say? Is that a woman’s name?”

“His teats are big enough. Next time we meet I’ll peek beneath his breeches to be sure. Is that a *cyvasse* set over there? Bring it out and we’ll have that game. But first, I think, a cup of wine. My throat is dry as an old bone, and I can see that I have a deal of talking to do.”