

## TYRION

“The queen intends to send Prince Tommen away.” They knelt alone in the hushed dimness of the sept, surrounded by shadows and flickering candles, but even so Lancel kept his voice low. “Lord Gyles will take him to Rosby, and conceal him there in the guise of a page. They plan to darken his hair and tell everyone that he is the son of a hedge knight.”

“Is it the mob she fears? Or me?”

“Both,” said Lancel.

“Ah.” Tyrion had known nothing of this ploy. Had Varys’s little birds failed him for once? Even spiders must nod, he supposed... or was the eunuch playing a deeper and more subtle game than he knew? “You have my thanks, ser.”

“Will you grant me the boon I asked of you?”

“Perhaps.” Lancel wanted his own command in the next battle. A splendid way to die before he finished growing that mustache, but young knights always think themselves invincible.

Tyrion lingered after his cousin had slipped away. At the Warrior’s altar, he used one candle to light another. *Watch over my brother, you bloody bastard, he’s one of yours.* He lit a second candle to the Stranger, for himself.

That night, when the Red Keep was dark, Bronn arrived to find him sealing a letter. “Take this to Ser Jacelyn Bywater.” The dwarf dribbled hot golden wax down onto the parchment.

“What does it say?” Bronn could not read, so he asked impudent questions.

“That he’s to take fifty of his best swords and scout the roseroad.” Tyrion pressed his seal into the soft wax.

“Stannis is more like to come up the kingsroad.”

“Oh, I know. Tell Bywater to disregard what’s in the letter and take his men north. He’s to lay a trap along the Rosby road. Lord Gyles will depart for his castle in a day or two, with a dozen men-at-arms, some servants, and my nephew. Prince Tommen may be dressed as a page.”

“You want the boy brought back, is that it?”

“No. I want him taken on to the castle.” Removing the boy from the city was one of his sister’s better notions, Tyrion had decided. At Rosby, Tommen would be safe from the mob, and keeping him apart from his brother also made things more difficult for Stannis; even if he took King’s Landing and executed Joffrey, he’d still have a Lannister claimant to contend with. “Lord Gyles is too sickly to run and too craven to fight. He’ll command his castellan to open the gates. Once inside the walls, Bywater is to expel the garrison and hold Tommen there safe. Ask him how he likes the sound of *Lord Bywater*.”

“Lord Bronn would sound better. I could grab the boy for you just as well. I’ll dandle him on my knee and sing him nursery songs if there’s a lordship in it.”

“I need you here,” said Tyrion. *And I don’t trust you with my nephew.* Should any ill befall Joffrey, the Lannister claim to the Iron Throne would rest on Tommen’s young shoulders. Ser Jacelyn’s gold cloaks would defend the boy; Bronn’s sellswords were more apt to sell him to his enemies.

“What should the new lord do with the old one?”

“Whatever he pleases, so long as he remembers to feed him. I don’t want him dying.” Tyrion pushed away from the table. “My sister will send one of the Kingsguard with the prince.”

Bronn was not concerned. “The Hound is Joffrey’s dog, he won’t leave him. Ironhand’s gold cloaks should be able to handle the others easy enough.”

“If it comes to killing, tell Ser Jacelyn I won’t have it done in front of Tommen.” Tyrion donned a heavy cloak of dark brown wool. “My nephew is tender-hearted.”

“Are you certain he’s a Lannister?”

“I’m certain of nothing but winter and battle,” he said. “Come. I’m riding with you part of the way.”

“Chataya’s?”

“You know me too well.”

They left through a postern gate in the north wall. Tyrion put his heels into his horse and clattered down Shadowblack Lane. A few furtive shapes darted into alleys at the sound of hoofbeats on the cobbles, but no one dared accost them. The council had extended his curfew; it was death to be taken on the streets after the evenfall bells had sung. The measure had restored a degree of peace to King’s Landing and quartered the number of corpses found in the alleys of a morning, yet Varys said the people cursed him for it. *They should be thankful they have the breath to curse.* A pair of gold cloaks confronted them as they were making their way along Coppersmith’s Wynd, but when they realized whom they’d challenged they begged the Hand’s pardons and waved them on. Bronn turned south for the Mud Gate and they parted company.

Tyrion rode on toward Chataya’s, but suddenly his patience deserted him. He twisted in the saddle, scanning the street behind. There were no signs of followers. Every window was dark or tightly shuttered. He heard nothing but the wind swirling down the alleys. *If Cersei has someone stalking me tonight, he must be disguised as a rat.* “Bugger it all,” he muttered. He was sick of caution. Wheeling his horse around, he dug in his spurs. *If anyone’s after me, we’ll see how well they ride.* He flew through the moonlight streets, clattering over cobbles, darting down narrow alleys and up twisty wynds, racing to his love.

As he hammered on the gate he heard music wafting faintly over the spiked stone walls. One of the Ibbenese ushered him inside. Tyrion gave the man his horse and said, “Who is that?” The diamond-shaped panes of the longhall windows shone with yellow light, and he could hear a man singing.

The Ibbenese shrugged. “Fatbelly singer.”

The sound swelled as he walked from the stable to the house. Tyrion had never been fond of singers, and he liked this one even less than the run of the breed, sight unseen. When he pushed open the door, the man broke

off. “My lord Hand.” He knelt, balding and kettle-bellied, murmuring, “An honor, an honor.”

“M’lord.” Shae smiled at the sight of him. He liked that smile, the quick unthinking way it came to her pretty face. The girl wore her purple silk, belted with a cloth-of-silver sash. The colors favored her dark hair and the smooth cream of her skin.

“Sweetling,” he called her. “And who is this?”

The singer raised his eyes. “I am called Symon Silver Tongue, my lord. A player, a singer, a taleteller—”

“And a great fool,” Tyrion finished. “What did you call me, when I entered?”

“Call? I only...” The silver in Symon’s tongue seemed to have turned to lead. “My lord Hand, I said, an honor...”

“A wiser man would have pretended not to recognize me. Not that I would have been fooled, but you ought to have tried. What am I to do with you now? You know of my sweet Shae, you know where she dwells, you know that I visit by night alone.”

“I swear, I’ll tell no one...”

“On that much we agree. Good night to you.” Tyrion led Shae up the stairs.

“My singer may never sing again now,” she teased. “You’ve scared the voice from him.”

“A little fear will help him reach those high notes.”

She closed the door to their bedchamber. “You won’t hurt him, will you?” She lit a scented candle and knelt to pull off his boots. “His songs cheer me on the nights you don’t come.”

“Would that I could come every night,” he said as she rubbed his bare feet. “How well does he sing?”

“Better than some. Not so good as others.”

Tyrion opened her robe and buried his face between her breasts. She always smelled clean to him, even in this reeking sty of a city. “Keep him if

you like, but keep him close. I won't have him wandering the city spreading tales in pot-shops."

"He won't—" she started.

Tyrion covered her mouth with his own. He'd had talk enough; he needed the sweet simplicity of the pleasure he found between Shae's thighs. Here, at least, he was welcome, wanted.

Afterward, he eased his arm out from under her head, slipped on his tunic, and went down to the garden. A half-moon silvered the leaves of the fruit trees and shone on the surface of the stone bathing pond. Tyrion seated himself beside the water. Somewhere off to his right a cricket was chirping, a curiously homey sound. *It is peaceful here*, he thought, *but for how long?*

A whiff of something rank made him turn his head. Shae stood in the door behind him, dressed in the silvery robe he'd given her. *I loved a maid as white as winter, with moonglow in her hair*. Behind her stood one of the begging brothers, a portly man in filthy patched robes, his bare feet crusty with dirt, a bowl hung about his neck on a leather thong where a septon would have worn a crystal. The smell of him would have gagged a rat.

"Lord Varys has come to see you," Shae announced.

The begging brother blinked at her, astonished. Tyrion laughed. "To be sure. How is it you knew him when I did not?"

She shrugged. "It's still him. Only dressed different."

"A different look, a different smell, a different way of walking," said Tyrion. "Most men would be deceived."

"And most women, maybe. But not whores. A whore learns to see the man, not his garb, or she turns up dead in an alley."

Varys looked pained, and not because of the false scabs on his feet. Tyrion chuckled. "Shae, would you bring us some wine?" He might need a drink. Whatever brought the eunuch here in the dead of night was not like to be good.

"I almost fear to tell you why I've come, my lord," Varys said when Shae had left them. "I bring dire tidings."

“You ought to dress in black feathers, Varys, you’re as bad an omen as any raven.” Awkwardly, Tyrion pushed to his feet, half afraid to ask the next question. “Is it Jaime?” *If they have harmed him, nothing will save them.*

“No, my lord. A different matter. Ser Cortnay Penrose is dead. Storm’s End has opened its gates to Stannis Baratheon.”

Dismay drove all other thoughts from Tyrion’s mind. When Shae returned with the wine, he took one sip and flung the cup away to explode against the side of the house. She raised a hand to shield herself from the shards as the wine ran down the stones in long fingers, black in the moonlight. “*Damn him!*” Tyrion said.

Varys smiled, showing a mouth full of rotted teeth. “Who, my lord? Ser Cortnay or Lord Stannis?”

“Both of them.” Storm’s End was strong, it should have been able to hold out for half a year or more... time enough for his father to finish with Robb Stark. “How did this happen?”

Varys glanced at Shae. “My lord, must we trouble your sweet lady’s sleep with such grim and bloody talk?”

“A lady might be afraid,” said Shae, “but I’m not.”

“You should be,” Tyrion told her. “With Storm’s End fallen, Stannis will soon turn his attention toward King’s Landing.” He regretted flinging away that wine now. “Lord Varys, give us a moment, and I’ll ride back to the castle with you.”

“I shall wait in the stables.” He bowed and stomped off.

Tyrion drew Shae down beside him. “You are not safe here.”

“I have my walls, and the guards you gave me.”

“Sellswords,” Tyrion said. “They like my gold well enough, but will they die for it? As for these walls, a man could stand on another’s shoulders and be over in a heartbeat. A manse much like this one was burned during the riots. They killed the goldsmith who owned it for the crime of having a full larder, just as they tore the High Septon to pieces, raped Lollys half a

hundred times, and smashed Ser Aron's skull in. What do you think they would do if they got their hands on the Hand's lady?"

"The Hand's whore, you mean?" She looked at him with those big bold eyes of hers. "Though I would be your lady, m'lord. I'd dress in all the beautiful things you gave me, in satin and samite and cloth-of-gold, and I'd wear your jewels and hold your hand and sit by you at feasts. I could give you sons, I know I could... and I vow I'd never shame you."

*My love for you shames me enough.* "A sweet dream, Shae. Now put it aside, I beg you. It can never be."

"Because of the queen? I'm not afraid of her either."

"I am."

"Then *kill* her and be done with it. It's not as if there was any love between you."

Tyrion sighed. "She's my sister. The man who kills his own blood is cursed forever in the sight of gods and men. Moreover, whatever you and I may think of Cersei, my father and brother hold her dear. I can scheme with any man in the Seven Kingdoms, but the gods have not equipped me to face Jaime with swords in hand."

"The Young Wolf and Lord Stannis have swords and they don't scare you."

*How little you know, sweetling.* "Against them I have all the power of House Lannister. Against Jaime or my father, I have no more than a twisted back and a pair of stunted legs."

"You have me." Shae kissed him, her arms sliding around his neck as she pressed her body to his.

The kiss aroused him, as her kisses always did, but this time Tyrion gently disentangled himself. "Not now. Sweetling, I have... well, call it the seed of a plan. I think I might be able to bring you into the castle kitchens."

Shae's face went still. "The kitchens?"

"Yes. If I act through Varys, no one will be the wiser."

She giggled. “M’lord, I’d poison you. Every man who’s tasted my cooking has told me what a good whore I am.”

“The Red Keep has sufficient cooks. Butchers and bakers too. You’d need to pose as a scullion.”

“A pot girl,” she said, “in scratchy brown roughspun. Is that how m’lord wants to see me?”

“M’lord wants to see you alive,” Tyrion said. “You can scarcely scour pots in silk and velvet.”

“Has m’lord grown tired of me?” She reached a hand under his tunic and found his cock. In two quick strokes she had it hard. “*He* still wants me.” She laughed. “Would you like to fuck your kitchen wench, m’lord? You can dust me with flour and suck gravy off my titties if you...”

“Stop it.” The way she was acting reminded him of Dancy, who had tried so hard to win her wager. He yanked her hand away to keep her from further mischief. “This is not the time for bed sport, Shae. Your life may be at stake.”

Her grin was gone. “If I’ve displeased m’lord, I never meant it, only... couldn’t you just give me more guards?”

Tyrion breathed a deep sigh. *Remember how young she is*, he told himself. He took her hand. “Your gems can be replaced, and new gowns can be sewn twice as lovely as the old. To me, you’re the most precious thing within these walls. The Red Keep is not safe either, but it’s a deal safer than here. I want you there.”

“In the kitchens.” Her voice was flat. “Scouring pots.”

“For a short while.”

“My father made me his kitchen wench,” she said, her mouth twisting. “That was why I ran off.”

“You told me you ran off because your father made you his whore,” he reminded her.

“That too. I didn’t like scouring his pots no more than I liked his cock in me.” She tossed her head. “Why can’t you keep me in your tower? Half the lords at court keep bedwarmers.”



“I was expressly forbidden to take you to court.”

“By your stupid father.” Shae pouted. “You’re old enough to keep all the whores you want. Does he take you for a beardless boy? What could he do, spank you?”

He slapped her. Not hard, but hard enough. “Damn you,” he said. “*Damn you. Never mock me. Not you.*”

For a moment Shae did not speak. The only sound was the cricket, chirping, chirping. “Beg pardon, m’lord,” she said at last, in a heavy wooden voice. “I never meant to be impudent.”

*And I never meant to strike you. Gods be good, am I turning into Cersei?* “That was ill done,” he said. “On both our parts. Shae, you do not understand.” Words he had never meant to speak came tumbling out of him like mummers from a hollow horse. “When I was thirteen, I wed a crofter’s daughter. Or so I thought her. I was blind with love for her, and thought she felt the same for me, but my father rubbed my face in the truth. My bride was a whore Jaime had hired to give me my first taste of manhood.” *And I believed all of it, fool that I was.* “To drive the lesson home, Lord Tywin gave my wife to a barracks of his guardsmen to use as they pleased, and commanded me to watch.” *And to take her one last time, after the rest were done. One last time, with no trace of love or tenderness remaining.* “*So you will remember her as she truly is,*” he said, *and I should have defied him, but my cock betrayed me, and I did as I was bid.* “After he was done with her, my father had the marriage undone. It was as if we had never been wed, the septons said.” He squeezed her hand. “Please, let’s have no more talk of the Tower of the Hand. You will be in the kitchens only a little while. Once we’re done with Stannis, you’ll have another manse, and silks as soft as your hands.”

Shae’s eyes had grown large but he could not read what lay behind them. “My hands won’t be soft if I clean ovens and scrape plates all day. Will you still want them touching you when they’re all red and raw and cracked from hot water and lye soap?”

“More than ever,” he said. “When I look at them, they’ll remind me how brave you were.”

He could not say if she believed him. She lowered her eyes. "I am yours to command, m'lord."

It was as much acceptance as she could give tonight, he saw that plain enough. He kissed her cheek where he'd struck her, to take some sting from the blow. "I will send for you."

Varys was waiting in the stables, as promised. His horse looked spavined and half-dead. Tyrion mounted up; one of the sellswords opened the gates. They rode out in silence. *Why did I tell her about Tysha, gods help me?* he asked himself, suddenly afraid. There were some secrets that should never be spoken, some shames a man should take to his grave. What did he want from her, forgiveness? The way she had looked at him, what did that mean? Did she hate the thought of scouring pots that much, or was it his confession? *How could I tell her that and still think she would love me?* part of him said, and another part mocked, saying, *Fool of a dwarf, it is only the gold and jewels the whore loves.*

His scarred elbow was throbbing, jarred every time the horse set down a hoof. Sometimes he could almost fancy he heard the bones grinding together inside. Perhaps he should see a maester, get some potion for the pain... but since Pycelle had revealed himself for what he was, Tyrion Lannister mistrusted the maesters. The gods only knew who they were conspiring with, or what they had mixed in those potions they gave you. "Varys," he said. "I need to bring Shae into the castle without Cersei becoming aware." Briefly, he sketched out his kitchen scheme.

When he was done, the eunuch made a little clucking sound. "I will do as my lord commands, of course... but I must warn you, the kitchens are full of eyes and ears. Even if the girl falls under no particular suspicion, she will be subject to a thousand questions. Where was she born? Who were her parents? How did she come to King's Landing? The truth will never do, so she must lie... and lie, and lie." He glanced down at Tyrion. "And such a pretty young kitchen wench will incite lust as well as curiosity. She will be touched, pinched, patted, and fondled. Pot boys will crawl under her blankets of a night. Some lonely cook may seek to wed her. Bakers will knead her breasts with floured hands."

“I’d sooner have her fondled than stabbed,” said Tyrion.

Varys rode on a few paces and said, “It might be that there is another way. As it happens, the maidservant who attends Lady Tanda’s daughter has been filching her jewels. Were I to inform Lady Tanda, she would be forced to dismiss the girl at once. And the daughter would require a new maidservant.”

“I see.” This had possibilities, Tyrion saw at once. A lady’s bedmaid wore finer garb than a scullion, and often even a jewel or two. Shae should be pleased by that. And Cersei thought Lady Tanda tedious and hysterical, and Lollys a bovine lackwit. She was not like to pay them any friendly calls.

“Lollys is timid and trusting,” Varys said. “She will accept any tale she is told. Since the mob took her maidenhood she is afraid to leave her chambers, so Shae will be out of sight... but conveniently close, should you have need of comfort.”

“The Tower of the Hand is watched, you know as well as I. Cersei would be certain to grow curious if Lollys’s bedmaid starting paying me calls.”

“I might be able to slip the child into your bedchamber unseen. Chataya’s is not the only house to boast a hidden door.”

“A secret access? To *my* chambers?” Tyrion was more annoyed than surprised. Why else would Maegor the Cruel have ordered death for all the builders who had worked on his castle, except to preserve such secrets? “Yes, I suppose there would be. Where will I find the door? In my solar? My bedchamber?”

“My friend, you would not force me to reveal *all* my little secrets, would you?”

“Henceforth think of them as *our* little secrets, Varys.” Tyrion glanced up at the eunuch in his smelly mummer’s garb. “Assuming you *are* on my side...”

“Can you doubt it?”

“Why no, I trust you implicitly.” A bitter laugh echoed off the shuttered windows. “I trust you like one of my own blood, in truth. Now tell me how Cortnay Penrose died.”

“It is said that he threw himself from a tower.”

“Threw *himself*? No, I will not believe that!”

“His guards saw no man enter his chambers, nor did they find any within afterward.”

“Then the killer entered earlier and hid under the bed,” Tyrion suggested, “or he climbed down from the roof on a rope. Perhaps the guards are lying. Who’s to say they did not do the thing themselves?”

“Doubtless you are right, my lord.”

His smug tone said otherwise. “But you do not think so? How was it done, then?”

For a long moment Varys said nothing. The only sound was the stately *clack* of horseshoes on cobbles. Finally the eunuch cleared his throat. “My lord, do you believe in the old powers?”

“Magic, you mean?” Tyrion said impatiently. “Bloodspells, curses, shapeshifting, those sorts of things?” He snorted. “Do you mean to suggest that Ser Cortnay was magicked to his death?”

“Ser Cortnay had challenged Lord Stannis to single combat on the morning he died. I ask you, is this the act of a man lost to despair? Then there is the matter of Lord Renly’s mysterious and most fortuitous murder, even as his battle lines were forming up to sweep his brother from the field.” The eunuch paused a moment. “My lord, you once asked me how it was that I was cut.”

“I recall,” said Tyrion. “You did not want to talk of it.”

“Nor do I, but...” This pause was longer than the one before, and when Varys spoke again his voice was different somehow. “I was an orphan boy apprenticed to a traveling folly. Our master owned a fat little cog and we sailed up and down the narrow sea performing in all the Free Cities and from time to time in Oldtown and King’s Landing.

“One day at Myr, a certain man came to our folly. After the performance, he made an offer for me that my master found too tempting to refuse. I was in terror. I feared the man meant to use me as I had heard men used small boys, but in truth the only part of me he had need of was my manhood. He gave me a potion that made me powerless to move or speak, yet did nothing to dull my senses. With a long hooked blade, he sliced me root and stem, chanting all the while. I watched him burn my manly parts on a brazier. The flames turned blue, and I heard a voice answer his call, though I did not understand the words they spoke.

“The mummers had sailed by the time he was done with me. Once I had served his purpose, the man had no further interest in me, so he put me out. When I asked him what I should do now, he answered that he supposed I should die. To spite him, I resolved to live. I begged, I stole, and I sold what parts of my body still remained to me. Soon I was as good a thief as any in Myr, and when I was older I learned that often the contents of a man’s letters are more valuable than the contents of his purse.

“Yet I still dream of that night, my lord. Not of the sorcerer, nor his blade, nor even the way my manhood shriveled as it burned. I dream of the voice. The voice from the flames. Was it a god, a demon, some conjurer’s trick? I could not tell you, and I know all the tricks. All I can say for a certainty is that he called it, and it answered, and since that day I have hated magic and all those who practice it. If Lord Stannis is one such, I mean to see him dead.”

When he was done, they rode in silence for a time. Finally Tyrion said, “A harrowing tale. I’m sorry.”

The eunuch sighed. “You are sorry, but you do not believe me. No, my lord, no need to apologize. I was drugged and in pain and it was a very long time ago and far across the sea. No doubt I dreamed that voice. I’ve told myself as much a thousand times.”

“I believe in steel swords, gold coins, and men’s wits,” said Tyrion. “And I believe there once were dragons. I’ve seen their skulls, after all.”

“Let us hope that is the worst thing you ever see, my lord.”

“On that we agree.” Tyrion smiled. “And for Ser Cortnay’s death, well, we know Stannis hired sellsails from the Free Cities. Perhaps he bought himself a skilled assassin as well.”

“A *very* skilled assassin.”

“There are such. I used to dream that one day I’d be rich enough to send a Faceless Man after my sweet sister.”

“Regardless of how Ser Cortnay died,” said Varys, “he is dead, the castle fallen. Stannis is free to march.”

“Any chance we might convince the Dornishmen to descend on the Marches?” asked Tyrion.

“None.”

“A pity. Well, the threat may serve to keep the Marcher lords close to their castles, at least. What news of my father?”

“If Lord Tywin has won across the Red Fork, no word has reached me yet. If he does not hasten, he may be trapped between his foes. The Oakheart leaf and the Rowan tree have been seen north of the Mander.”

“No word from Littlefinger?”

“Perhaps he never reached Bitterbridge. Or perhaps he’s died there. Lord Tarly has seized Renly’s stores and put a great many to the sword; Florents, chiefly. Lord Caswell has shut himself up in his castle.”

Tyrion threw back his head and laughed.

Varys reined up, nonplussed. “My lord?”

“Don’t you see the jest, Lord Varys?” Tyrion waved a hand at the shuttered windows, at all the sleeping city. “Storm’s End is fallen and Stannis is coming with fire and steel and the gods alone know what dark powers, and the good folk don’t have Jaime to protect them, nor Robert nor Renly nor Rhaegar nor their precious Knight of Flowers. Only me, the one they hate.” He laughed again. “The dwarf, the evil counselor, the twisted little monkey demon. I’m all that stands between them and chaos.”