

TYRION

“If you die stupidly, I’m going to feed your body to the goats,” Tyrion threatened as the first load of Stone Crows pushed off from the quay.

Shagga laughed. “The Halfman has no goats.”

“I’ll get some just for you.”

Dawn was breaking, and pale ripples of light shimmered on the surface of the river, shattering under the poles and reforming when the ferry had passed. Timett had taken his Burned Men into the kingswood two days before. Yesterday the Black Ears and Moon Brothers followed, today the Stone Crows.

“Whatever you do, don’t try and fight a battle,” Tyrion said. “Strike at their camps and baggage train. Ambush their scouts and hang the bodies from trees ahead of their line of march, loop around and cut down stragglers. I want night attacks, so many and so sudden that they’ll be afraid to sleep—”

Shagga laid a hand atop Tyrion’s head. “All this I learned from Dolf son of Holger before my beard had grown. This is the way of war in the Mountains of the Moon.”

“The kingswood is not the Mountains of the Moon, and you won’t be fighting Milk Snakes and Painted Dogs. And *listen* to the guides I’m sending, they know this wood as well as you know your mountains. Heed their counsel and they’ll serve you well.”

“Shagga will listen to the Halfman’s pets,” the clansman promised solemnly. And then it was time for him to lead his garron onto the ferry. Tyrion watched them push off and pole out toward the center of the Blackwater. He felt a queer twinge in the pit of his stomach as Shagga faded in the morning mist. He was going to feel naked without his clansmen.

He still had Bronn’s hirelings, near eight hundred of them now, but sellswords were notoriously fickle. Tyrion had done what he could to buy their continued loyalty, promising Bronn and a dozen of his best men lands

and knighthoods when the battle was won. They'd drunk his wine, laughed at his jests, and called each other *ser* until they were all staggering... all but Bronn himself, who'd only smiled that insolent dark smile of his and afterward said, "They'll kill for that knighthood, but don't ever think they'll die for it."

Tyrion had no such delusion.

The gold cloaks were almost as uncertain a weapon. Six thousand men in the City Watch, thanks to Cersei, but only a quarter of them could be relied upon. "There's few out-and-out traitors, though there's some, even your spider hasn't found them all," Bywater had warned him. "But there's hundreds greener than spring grass, men who joined for bread and ale and safety. No man likes to look craven in the sight of his fellows, so they'll fight brave enough at the start, when it's all warhorns and blowing banners. But if the battle looks to be going sour they'll break, and they'll break bad. The first man to throw down his spear and run will have a thousand more trodding on his heels."

To be sure, there were seasoned men in the City Watch, the core of two thousand who'd gotten their gold cloaks from Robert, not Cersei. Yet even those... a watchman was not truly a soldier, Lord Tywin Lannister had been fond of saying. Of knights and squires and men-at-arms, Tyrion had no more than three hundred. Soon enough, he must test the truth of another of his father's sayings: One man on a wall was worth ten beneath it.

Bronn and the escort were waiting at the foot of the quay, amidst swarming beggars, strolling whores, and fishwives crying the catch. The fishwives did more business than all the rest combined. Buyers flocked around the barrels and stalls to haggle over winkles, clams, and river pike. With no other food coming into the city, the price of fish was ten times what it had been before the war, and still rising. Those who had coin came to the riverfront each morning and each evening, in hopes of bringing home an eel or a pot of red crabs; those who did not slipped between the stalls hoping to steal, or stood gaunt and forlorn beneath the walls.

The gold cloaks cleared a path through the press, shoving people aside with the shafts of their spears. Tyrion ignored the muttered curses as best he

could. A fish came sailing out of the crowd, slimy and rotten. It landed at his feet and flew to pieces. He stepped over it gingerly and climbed into his saddle. Children with swollen bellies were already fighting over pieces of the stinking fish.

Mounted, he gazed along the riverfront. Hammers rang in the morning air as carpenters swarmed over the Mud Gate, extending wooden hoardings from the battlements. Those were coming well. He was a deal less pleased by the clutter of ramshackle structures that had been allowed to grow up behind the quays, attaching themselves to the city walls like barnacles on the hull of a ship; bait shacks and pot-shops, warehouses, merchants' stalls, alehouses, the cribs where the cheaper sort of whores spread their legs. *It has to go, every bit of it.* As it was, Stannis would hardly need scaling ladders to storm the walls.

He called Bronn to his side. "Assemble a hundred men and burn everything you see here between the water's edge and the city walls." He waved his stubby fingers, taking in all the waterfront squalor. "I want nothing left standing, do you understand?"

The black-haired sellsword turned his head, considering the task. "Them as own all this won't like that much."

"I never imagined they would. So be it; they'll have something else to curse the evil monkey demon for."

"Some may fight."

"See that they lose."

"What do we do with those that live here?"

"Let them have a reasonable time to remove their property, and then move them out. Try not to kill any of them, they're not the enemy. And no more rapes! Keep your men in line, damn it."

"They're sellswords, not septons," said Bronn. "Next you'll be telling me you want them sober."

"It couldn't hurt."

Tyryon only wished he could as easily make city walls twice as tall and three times as thick. Though perhaps it did not matter. Massive walls and

tall towers had not saved Storm's End, nor Harrenhal, nor even Winterfell.

He remembered Winterfell as he had last seen it. Not as grotesquely huge as Harrenhal, nor as solid and impregnable to look at as Storm's End, yet there had been a great strength in those stones, a sense that within those walls a man might feel safe. The news of the castle's fall had come as a wrenching shock. "The gods give with one hand and take with the other," he muttered under his breath when Varys told him. They had given the Starks Harrenhal and taken Winterfell, a dismal exchange.

No doubt he should be rejoicing. Robb Stark would have to turn north now. If he could not defend his own home and hearth, he was no sort of king at all. It meant reprieve for the west, for House Lannister, and yet...

Tyrian had only the vaguest memory of Theon Greyjoy from his time with the Starks. A callow youth, always smiling, skilled with a bow; it was hard to imagine him as Lord of Winterfell. The Lord of Winterfell would always be a Stark.

He remembered their godswood; the tall sentinels armored in their grey-green needles, the great oaks, the hawthorn and ash and soldier pines, and at the center the heart tree standing like some pale giant frozen in time. He could almost smell the place, earthy and brooding, the smell of centuries, and he remembered how dark the wood had been even by day. *That wood was Winterfell. It was the north. I never felt so out of place as I did when I walked there, so much an unwelcome intruder.* He wondered if the Greyjoys would feel it too. The castle might well be theirs, but never that godswood. Not in a year, or ten, or fifty.

Tyrian Lannister walked his horse slowly toward the Mud Gate. *Winterfell is nothing to you, he reminded himself. Be glad the place has fallen, and look to your own walls.* The gate was open. Inside, three great trebuchets stood side by side in the market square, peering over the battlements like three huge birds. Their throwing arms were made from the trunks of old oaks, and banded with iron to keep them from splitting. The gold cloaks had named them the Three Whores, because they'd be giving Lord Stannis such a lusty welcome. *Or so we hope.*

Tyrion put his heels into his horse and trotted through the Mud Gate, breasting the human tide. Once beyond the Whores, the press grew thinner and the street opened up around him.

The ride back to the Red Keep was uneventful, but at the Tower of the Hand he found a dozen angry trader captains waiting in his audience chamber to protest the seizure of their ships. He gave them a sincere apology and promised compensation once the war was done. That did little to appease them. “What if you should lose, my lord?” one Braavosi asked.

“Then apply to King Stannis for your compensation.”

By the time he rid himself of them, bells were ringing and Tyrion knew he would be late for the installation. He waddled across the yard almost at a run and crowded into the back of the castle sept as Joffrey fastened white silk cloaks about the shoulders of the two newest members of his Kingsguard. The rite seemed to require that everyone stand, so Tyrion saw nothing but a wall of courtly arses. On the other hand, once the new High Septon was finished leading the two knights through their solemn vows and anointing them in the names of the Seven, he would be well positioned to be first out the doors.

He approved of his sister’s choice of Ser Balon Swann to take the place of the slain Preston Greenfield. The Swanns were Marcher lords, proud, powerful, and cautious. Pleading illness, Lord Gulian Swann had remained in his castle, taking no part in the war, but his eldest son had ridden with Renly and now Stannis, while Balon, the younger, served at King’s Landing. If he’d had a third son, Tyrion suspected he’d be off with Robb Stark. It was not perhaps the most honorable course, but it showed good sense; whoever won the iron Throne, the Swanns intended to survive. In addition to being well born, young Ser Balon was valiant, courtly, and skilled at arms; good with a lance, better with a morningstar, superb with the bow. He would serve with honor and courage.

Alas, Tyrion could not say the same for Cersei’s second choice. Ser Osmund Kettleblack *looked* formidable enough. He stood six feet and six inches, most of it sinew and muscle, and his hook nose, bushy eyebrows, and spade-shaped brown beard gave his face a fierce aspect, so long as he

did not smile. Lowborn, no more than a hedge knight, Kettleblack was utterly dependent on Cersei for his advancement, which was doubtless why she'd picked him. "Ser Osmund is as loyal as he is brave," she'd told Joffrey when she put forward his name. It was true, unfortunately. The good Ser Osmund had been selling her secrets to Bronn since the day she'd hired him, but Tyrion could scarcely *tell* her that.

He supposed he ought not complain. The appointment gave him another ear close to the king, unbeknownst to his sister. And even if Ser Osmund proved an utter craven, he would be no worse than Ser Boros Blount, currently residing in a dungeon at Rosby. Ser Boros had been escorting Tommen and Lord Gyles when Ser Jacelyn Bywater and his gold cloaks had surprised them, and had yielded up his charge with an alacrity that would have enraged old Ser Barristan Selmy as much as it did Cersei; a knight of the Kingsguard was supposed to die in defense of the king and royal family. His sister had insisted that Joffrey strip Blount of his white cloak on the grounds of treason and cowardice. *And now she replaces him with another man just as hollow.*

The praying, vowing, and anointing seemed to take most of the morning. Tyrion's legs soon began to ache. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, restless. Lady Tanda stood several rows up, he saw, but her daughter was not with her. He had been half hoping to catch a glimpse of Shae. Varys said she was doing well, but he would prefer to see for himself.

"Better a lady's maid than a pot girl," Shae had said when Tyrion told her the eunuch's scheme. "Can I take my belt of silver flowers and my gold collar with the black diamonds you said looked like my eyes? I won't wear them if you say I shouldn't."

Loath as he was to disappoint her, Tyrion had to point out that while Lady Tanda was by no means a clever woman, even she might wonder if her daughter's bedmaid seemed to own more jewelry than her daughter. "Choose two or three dresses, no more," he commanded her. "Good wool, no silk, no samite, and no fur. The rest I'll keep in my own chambers for when you visit me." It was not the answer Shae had wanted, but at least she was safe.

When the investiture was finally done Joffrey marched out between Ser Balon and Ser Osmund in their new white cloaks, while Tyrion lingered for a word with the new High Septon (who was *his* choice, and wise enough to know who put the honey on his bread). “I want the gods on our side,” Tyrion told him bluntly. “Tell them that Stannis has vowed to burn the Great Sept of Baelor.”

“Is it true, my lord?” asked the High Septon, a small, shrewd man with a wispy white beard and wizened face.

Tyrion shrugged. “It may be. Stannis burned the godswood at Storm’s End as an offering to the Lord of Light. If he’d offend the old gods, why should he spare the new? Tell them that. Tell them that any man who thinks to give aid to the usurper betrays the gods as well as his rightful king.”

“I shall, my lord. And I shall command them to pray for the health of the king and his Hand as well.”

Hallyne the Pyromancer was waiting on him when Tyrion returned to his solar, and Maester Frenken had brought messages. He let the alchemist wait a little longer while he read what the ravens had brought him. There was an old letter from Doran Martell, warning him that Storm’s End had fallen, and a much more intriguing one from Balon Greyjoy on Pyke, who styled himself *King of the Isles and the North*. He invited King Joffrey to send an envoy to the Iron Islands to fix the borders between their realms and discuss a possible alliance.

Tyrion read the letter three times and set it aside. Lord Balon’s longships would have been a great help against the fleet sailing up from Storm’s End, but they were thousands of leagues away on the wrong side of Westeros, and Tyrion was far from certain that he wanted to give away half the realm. *Perhaps I should spill this one in Cersei’s lap, or take it to the council.*

Only then did he admit Hallyne with the latest tallies from the alchemists. “This cannot be true,” said Tyrion as he pored over the ledgers. “Almost thirteen thousand jars? Do you take me for a fool? I’m not about to pay the king’s gold for empty jars and pots of sewage sealed with wax, I warn you.”

“No, no,” Hallyne squeaked, “the sums are accurate, I swear. We have been, hmmm, most fortunate, my lord Hand. Another cache of Lord Rossart’s was found, more than three hundred jars. Under the Dragonpit! Some whores have been using the ruins to entertain their patrons, and one of them fell through a patch of rotted floor into a cellar. When he felt the jars, he mistook them for wine. He was so drunk he broke the seal and drank some.”

“There was a prince who tried that once,” said Tyrion dryly. “I haven’t seen any dragons rising over the city, so it would seem it didn’t work this time either.” The Dragonpit atop the hill of Rhaenys had been abandoned for a century and a half. He supposed it was as good a place as any to store wildfire, and better than most, but it would have been nice if the late Lord Rossart had told someone. “Three hundred jars, you say? That still does not account for these totals. You are several thousand jars ahead of the best estimate you gave me when last we met.”

“Yes, yes, that’s so.” Hallyne mopped at his pale brow with the sleeve of his black-and-scarlet robe. “We have been working very hard, my lord Hand, hmmm.”

“That would doubtless explain why you are making so much more of the substance than before.” Smiling, Tyrion fixed the pyromancer with his mismatched stare. “Though it does raise the question of why you did not begin working hard until now.”

Hallyne had the complexion of a mushroom, so it was hard to see how he could turn any paler, yet somehow he managed. “We *were*, my lord Hand, my brothers and I have been laboring day and night from the first, I assure you. It is only, hmmm, we have made so much of the substance that we have become, hmmm, more *practiced* as it were, and also”—the alchemist shifted uncomfortably—“certain spells, hmmm, ancient secrets of our order, very delicate, very troublesome, but necessary if the substance is to be, hmmm, all it should be...”

Tyrion was growing impatient. Ser Jacelyn Bywater was likely here by now, and Ironhand disliked waiting. “Yes, you have secret spells; how splendid. What of them?”

“They, hmmm, seem to be working better than they were.” Hallyne smiled weakly. “You don’t suppose there are any dragons about, do you?”

“Not unless you found one under the Dragonpit. Why?”

“Oh, pardon, I was just remembering something old Wisdom Pollitor told me once, when I was an acolyte. I’d asked him why so many of our spells seemed, well, not as *effectual* as the scrolls would have us believe, and he said it was because magic had begun to go out of the world the day the last dragon died.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’ve seen no dragons. I have noticed the King’s Justice lurking about, however. Should any of these fruits you’re selling me turn out to be filled with anything but wildfire, you’ll be seeing him as well.”

Hallyne fled so quickly that he almost bowled over Ser Jacelyn—no, *Lord* Jacelyn, he must remember that. Ironhand was mercifully direct, as ever. He’d returned from Rosby to deliver a fresh levy of spearmen recruited from Lord Gyles’s estates and resume his command of the City Watch. “How does my nephew fare?” Tyrion asked when they were done discussing the city’s defenses.

“Prince Tommen is hale and happy, my lord. He has adopted a fawn some of my men brought home from a hunt. He had one once before, he says, but Joffrey skinned her for a jerkin. He asks about his mother sometimes, and often begins letters to the Princess Myrcella, though he never seems to finish any. His brother, however, he does not seem to miss at all.”

“You have made suitable arrangements for him, should the battle be lost?”

“My men have their instructions.”

“Which are?”

“You commanded me to tell no one, my lord.”

That made him smile. “I’m pleased you remember.” Should King’s Landing fall, he might well be taken alive. Better if he did not know where Joffrey’s heir might be found.

Varys appeared not long after Lord Jacelyn had left. “Men are such faithless creatures,” he said by way of greeting.

Tyrion sighed. “Who’s the traitor today?”

The eunuch handed him a scroll. “So much villainy, it sings a sad song for our age. Did honor die with our fathers?”

“My father is not dead yet.” Tyrion scanned the list. “I know some of these names. These are rich men. Traders, merchants, craftsmen. Why should they conspire against us?”

“It seems they believe that Lord Stannis must win, and wish to share his victory. They call themselves the Antler Men, after the crowned stag.”

“Someone should tell them that Stannis changed his sigil. Then they can be the Hot Hearts.” It was no matter for jests, though; it appeared that these Antler Men had armed several hundred followers, to seize the Old Gate once battle was joined, and admit the enemy to the city. Among the names on the list was the master armorer Salloreon. “I suppose this means I won’t be getting that terrifying helm with the demon horns,” Tyrion complained as he scrawled the order for the man’s arrest.