

## TYRION

Janos Slynt was a butcher's son, and he laughed like a man chopping meat. "More wine?" Tyrion asked him.

"I should not object," Lord Janos said, holding out his cup. He was built like a keg, and had a similar capacity. "I should not object at all. That's a fine red. From the Arbor?"

"Dornish." Tyrion gestured, and his serving man poured. But for the servants, he and Lord Janos were alone in the Small Hall, at a small candlelit table surrounded by darkness. "Quite the find. Dornish wines are not often so rich."

"Rich," said the big frog-faced man, taking a healthy gulp. He was not a man for sipping, Janos Slynt. Tyrion had made note of that at once. "Yes, rich, that's the very word I was searching for, the *very* word. You have a gift for words, Lord Tyrion, if I might say so. And you tell a droll tale. Droll, yes."

"I'm pleased you think so... but I'm not a lord, as you are. A simple *Tyrion* will suffice for me, Lord Janos."

"As you wish." He took another swallow, dribbling wine on the front of his black satin doublet. He was wearing a cloth-of-gold half cape fastened with a miniature spear, its point enameled in dark red. And he was well and truly drunk.

Tyrion covered his mouth and belched politely. Unlike Lord Janos he had gone easy on the wine, but he was very full. The first thing he had done after taking up residence in the Tower of the Hand was inquire after the finest cook in the city and take her into his service. This evening they had supped on oxtail soup, summer greens tossed with pecans, grapes, red fennel, and crumbled cheese, hot crab pie, spiced squash, and quails drowned in butter. Each dish had come with its own wine. Lord Janos allowed that he had never eaten half so well. "No doubt that will change when you take your seat in Harrenhal," Tyrion said.

“For a certainty. Perhaps I should ask this cook of yours to enter my service, what do you say?”

“Wars have been fought over less,” he said, and they both had a good long laugh. “You’re a bold man to take Harrenhal for your seat. Such a grim place, and *huge*... costly to maintain. And some say cursed as well.”

“Should I fear a pile of stone?” He hooted at the notion. “A bold man, you said. You must be bold, to rise. As I have. To Harrenhal, yes! And why not? You know. You are a bold man too, I sense. Small, mayhap, but *bold*.”

“You are too kind. More wine?”

“No. No, truly, I... oh, gods be damned, *yes*. Why not? A bold man drinks his fill!”

“Truly.” Tyrion filled Lord Slynt’s cup to the brim. “I have been glancing over the names you put forward to take your place as Commander of the City Watch.”

“Good men. Fine men. Any of the six will do, but I’d choose Allar Deem. My right arm. Good good man. Loyal. Pick him and you won’t be sorry. If he pleases the king.”

“To be sure.” Tyrion took a small sip of his own wine. “I had been considering Ser Jacelyn Bywater. He’s been captain on the Mud Gate for three years, and he served with valor during Balon Greyjoy’s Rebellion. King Robert knighted him at Pyke. And yet his name does not appear on your list.”

Lord Janos Slynt took a gulp of wine and sloshed it around in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. “Bywater. Well. Brave man, to be sure, yet... he’s *rigid*, that one. A queer dog. The men don’t like him. A cripple too, lost his hand at Pyke, that’s what got him knighted. A poor trade, if you ask me, a hand for a *ser*.” He laughed. “Ser Jacelyn thinks overmuch of himself and his honor, as I see it. You’ll do better leaving that one where he is, my lor—Tyrion. Allar Deem’s the man for you.”

“Deem is little loved in the streets, I am told.”

“He’s feared. That’s better.”

“What was it I heard of him? Some trouble in a brothel?”

“That. Not his fault, my lor—Tyrion. No. He never meant to kill the woman, that was her own doing. He warned her to stand aside and let him do his duty.”

“Still... mothers and children, he might have expected she’d try to save the babe.” Tyrion smiled. “Have some of this cheese, it goes splendidly with the wine. Tell me, why did you choose Deem for that unhappy task?”

“A good commander knows his men, Tyrion. Some are good for one job, some for another. Doing for a babe, and her still on the tit, that takes a certain sort. Not every man’d do it. Even if it was only some whore and her whelp.”

“I suppose that’s so,” said Tyrion, hearing *only some whore* and thinking of Shae, and Tysha long ago, and all the other women who had taken his coin and his seed over the years.

Slynt went on, oblivious. “A hard man for a hard job, is Deem. Does as he’s told, and never a word afterward.” He cut a slice off the cheese. “This *is* fine. Sharp. Give me a good sharp knife and a good sharp cheese and I’m a happy man.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Enjoy it while you can. With the riverlands in flame and Renly king in Highgarden, good cheese will soon be hard to come by. So who sent you after the whore’s bastard?”

Lord Janos gave Tyrion a wary look, then laughed and wagged a wedge of cheese at him. “You’re a sly one, Tyrion. Thought you could trick me, did you? it takes more than wine and cheese to make Janos Slynt tell more than he should. I pride myself. Never a question, and never a word afterward, not with me.”

“As with Deem.”

“Just the same. You make him your Commander when I’m off to Harrenhal, and you won’t regret it.”

Tyrion broke off a nibble of the cheese. It was sharp indeed, and veined with wine; very choice. “Whoever the king names will not have an easy time stepping into *your* armor, I can tell. Lord Mormont faces the same problem.”

Lord Janos looked puzzled. “I thought she was a lady. Mormont. Beds down with bears, that’s the one?”

“It was her brother I was speaking of. Jeor Mormont, the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. When I was visiting with him on the Wall, he mentioned how concerned he was about finding a good man to take his place. The Watch gets so few good men these days.” Tyrion grinned. “He’d sleep easier if he had a man like you, I imagine. Or the valiant Allar Deem.”

Lord Janos roared. “Small chance of that!”

“One would think,” Tyrion said, “but life does take queer turns. Consider Eddard Stark, my lord. I don’t suppose he ever imagined his life would end on the steps of Baelor’s Sept.”

“There were damn few as did,” Lord Janos allowed, chuckling.

Tyrion chuckled too. “A pity I wasn’t here to see it. They say even Varys was surprised.”

Lord Janos laughed so hard his gut shook. “The Spider,” he said. “Knows everything, they say. Well, he didn’t know *that*.”

“How could he?” Tyrion put the first hint of a chill in his tone. “He had helped persuade my sister that Stark should be pardoned, on the condition that he take the black.”

“Eh?” Janos Slynt blinked vaguely at Tyrion.

“My sister Cersei,” Tyrion repeated, a shade more strongly, in case the fool had some doubt who he meant. “The Queen Regent.”

“Yes.” Slynt took a swallow. “As to that, well... the king commanded it, m’lord. The king himself.”

“The king is thirteen,” Tyrion reminded him.

“Still. He *is* the king.” Slynt’s jowls quivered when he frowned. “The Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Well, one or two of them, at least,” Tyrion said with a sour smile. “Might I have a look at your spear?”

“My spear?” Lord Janos blinked in confusion.

Tyrion pointed. “The clasp that fastens your cape.”

Hesitantly, Lord Janos drew out the ornament and handed it to Tyrion.

“We have goldsmiths in Lannisport who do better work,” he opined. “The red enamel blood is a shade much, if you don’t mind my saying. Tell me, my lord, did you drive the spear into the man’s back yourself, or did you only give the command?”

“I gave the command, and I’d give it again. Lord Stark was a traitor.” The bald spot in the middle of Slynt’s head was beet-red, and his cloth-of-gold cape had slithered off his shoulders onto the floor. “The man tried to buy me.”

“Little dreaming that you had already been sold.”

Slynt slammed down his wine cup. “Are you drunk? If you think I will sit here and have my honor questioned...”

“What honor is that? I do admit, you made a better bargain than Ser Jacelyn. A lordship and a castle for a spear thrust in the back, and you didn’t even need to thrust the spear.” He tossed the golden ornament back to Janos Slynt. It bounced off his chest and clattered to the floor as the man rose.

“I mislike the tone of your voice, my lo—Imp. I am the Lord of Harrenhal and a member of the king’s council, who are you to chastise me like this?”

Tyrion cocked his head sideways. “I think you know quite well who I am. How many sons do you have?”

“What are my sons to you, dwarf?”

“*Dwarf?*” His anger flashed. “You should have stopped at Imp. I am Tyrion of House Lannister, and someday, if you have the sense the gods gave a sea slug, you will drop to your knees in thanks that it was me you had to deal with, and not my lord father. Now, *how many sons do you have?*”

Tyrion could see the sudden fear in Janos Slynt’s eyes. “Th—three, m’lord. And a daughter. Please, m’lord—”

“You need not beg.” He slid off his chair. “You have my word, no harm will come to them. The younger boys will be fostered out as squires. If they serve well and loyally, they may be knights in time. Let it never be said that House Lannister does not reward those who serve it. Your eldest son will inherit the title Lord Slynt, and this appalling sigil of yours.” He kicked at the little golden spear and sent it skittering across the floor. “Lands will be found for him, and he can build a seat for himself. It will not be Harrenhal, but it will be sufficient. It will be up to him to make a marriage for the girl.”

Janos Slynt’s face had gone from red to white. “Wh-what... what do you...?” His jowls were quivering like mounds of suet.

“What do I mean to do with *you*?” Tyrion let the oaf tremble for a moment before he answered. “The carrack *Summer’s Dream* sails on the morning tide. Her master tells me she will call at Gulltown, the Three Sisters, the isle of Skagos, and Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. When you see Lord Commander Mormont, give him my fond regards, and tell him that I have not forgotten the needs of the Night’s Watch. I wish you long life and good service, my lord.”

Once Janos Slynt realized he was not to be summarily executed, color returned to his face. He thrust his jaw out. “We will see about this, Imp. *Dwarf*. Perhaps it will be you on that ship, what do you think of that? Perhaps it will be you on the Wall.” He gave a bark of anxious laughter. “You and your threats, well, we will see. I am the king’s friend, you know. We shall hear what Joffrey has to say about this. And Littlefinger and the queen, oh, yes. Janos Slynt has a good many friends. We will see who goes sailing, I promise you. Indeed we will.”

Slynt spun on his heel like the watchman he’d once been, and strode the length of the Small Hall, boots ringing on the stone. He clattered up the steps, threw open the door... and came face-to-face with a tall, lantern-jawed man in black breastplate and gold cloak. Strapped to the stump of his right wrist was an iron hand. “Janos,” he said, deep-set eyes glinting under a prominent brow ridge and a shock of salt-and-pepper hair. Six gold cloaks moved quietly into the Small Hall behind him as Janos Slynt backed away.

“Lord Slynt,” Tyrion called out, “I believe you know Ser Jacelyn Bywater, our new Commander of the City Watch.”

“We have a litter waiting for you, my lord,” Ser Jacelyn told Slynt. “The docks are dark and distant, and the streets are not safe by night. Men.”

As the gold cloaks ushered out their onetime commander, Tyrion called Ser Jacelyn to his side and handed him a roll of parchment. “It’s a long voyage, and Lord Slynt will want for company. See that these six join him on the *Summer’s Dream*.”

Bywater glanced over the names and smiled. “As you will.”

“There’s one,” Tyrion said quietly. “Deem. Tell the captain it would not be taken amiss if that one should happen to be swept overboard before they reach Eastwatch.”

“I’m told those northern waters are very stormy, my lord,” Ser Jacelyn bowed and took his leave, his cloak rippling behind him. He trod on Slynt’s cloth-of-gold cape on his way.

Tyrion sat alone, sipping at what remained of the fine sweet Dornish wine. Servants came and went, clearing the dishes from the table. He told them to leave the wine. When they were done, Varys came gliding into the hall, wearing flowing lavender robes that matched his smell. “Oh sweetly done, my good lord.”

“Then why do I have this bitter taste in my mouth?” He pressed his fingers into his temples. “I told them to throw Allar Deem into the sea. I am sorely tempted to do the same with you.”

“You might be disappointed by the result,” Varys replied. “The storms come and go, the waves crash overhead, the big fish eat the little fish, and I keep on paddling. Might I trouble you for a taste of the wine that Lord Slynt enjoyed so much?”

Tyrion waved at the flagon, frowning.

Varys filled a cup. “Ah. Sweet as summer.” He took another sip. “I hear the grapes singing on my tongue.”

“I wondered what that noise was. Tell the grapes to keep still, my head is about to split. It was my sister. That was what the oh-so-loyal Lord Janos

refused to say. *Cersei* sent the gold cloaks to that brothel.”

Varys tittered nervously. So he had known all along.

“You left that part out,” Tyrion said accusingly.

“Your own sweet sister,” Varys said, so grief-stricken he looked close to tears. “It is a hard thing to tell a man, my lord. I was fearful how you might take it. Can you forgive me?”

“No,” Tyrion snapped. “Damn you. Damn *her*.” He could not touch Cersei, he knew. Not yet, not even if he’d wanted to, and he was far from certain that he did. Yet it rankled, to sit here and make a mummer’s show of justice by punishing the sorry likes of Janos Slynt and Allar Deem, while his sister continued on her savage course. “In future, you will tell me what you know, Lord Varys. *All* of what you know.”

The eunuch’s smile was sly. “That might take rather a long time, my good lord. I know quite a lot.”

“Not enough to save this child, it would seem.”

“Alas, no. There was another bastard, a boy, older. I took steps to see him removed from harm’s way... but I confess, I never dreamed the babe would be at risk. A baseborn girl, less than a year old, with a whore for a mother. What threat could she pose?”

“She was Robert’s,” Tyrion said bitterly. “That was enough for Cersei, it would seem.”

“Yes. It is grievous sad. I must blame myself for the poor sweet babe and her mother, who was so young and loved the king.”

“Did she?” Tyrion had never seen the dead girl’s face, but in his mind she was Shae and Tysha both. “Can a whore truly love anyone, I wonder? No, don’t answer. Some things I would rather not know.” He had settled Shae in a sprawling stone-and-timber manse, with its own well and stable and garden; he had given her servants to see to her wants, a white bird from the Summer Isles to keep her company, silks and silver and gemstones to adorn her, guards to protect her. And yet she seemed restive. She wanted to be with him more, she told him; she wanted to serve him and help him. “You help me most here, between the sheets,” he told her one night after



their loving as he lay beside her, his head pillowed against her breast, his groin aching with a sweet soreness. She made no reply, save with her eyes. He could see there that it was not what she'd wanted to hear.

Sighing, Tyrion started to reach for the wine again, then remembered Lord Janos and pushed the flagon away. "It does seem my sister was telling the truth about Stark's death. We have my nephew to thank for that madness."

"King Joffrey gave the command. Janos Slynt and Ser Ilyn Payne carried it out, swiftly, without hesitation..."

"...almost as if they had expected it. Yes, we have been over this ground before, without profit. A folly."

"With the City Watch in hand, my lord, you are well placed to see to it that His Grace commits no further... follies? To be sure, there is still the queen's household guard to consider..."

"The red cloaks?" Tyrion shrugged. "Vylarr's loyalty is to Casterly Rock. He knows I am here with my father's authority. Cersei would find it hard to use his men against me... besides, they are only a hundred. I have half again as many men of my own. *And* six thousand gold cloaks, if Bywater is the man you claim."

"You will find Ser Jacelyn to be courageous, honorable, obedient... and most grateful."

"To whom, I wonder?" Tyrion did not trust Varys, though there was no denying his value. He knew things, beyond a doubt. "Why *are* you so helpful, my lord Varys?" he asked, studying the man's soft hands, the bald powdered face, the slimy little smile.

"You are the Hand. I serve the realm, the king, and you."

"As you served Jon Arryn and Eddard Stark?"

"I served Lord Arryn and Lord Stark as best I could. I was saddened and horrified by their most untimely deaths."

"Think how *I* feel. I'm like to be next."

"Oh, I think not," Varys said, swirling the wine in his cup. "Power is a curious thing, my lord. Perchance you have considered the riddle I posed

you that day in the inn?”

“It has crossed my mind a time or two,” Tyrion admitted. “The king, the priest, the rich man—who lives and who dies? Who will the swordsman obey? It’s a riddle without an answer, or rather, too many answers. All depends on the man with the sword.”

“And yet he is no one,” Varys said. “He has neither crown nor gold nor favor of the gods, only a piece of pointed steel.”

“That piece of steel is the power of life and death.”

“Just so... yet if it is the swordsmen who rule us in truth, why do we pretend our kings hold the power? Why should a strong man with a sword *ever* obey a child king like Joffrey, or a wine-sodden oaf like his father? “

“Because these child kings and drunken oafs can call other strong men, with other swords.”

“Then these other swordsmen have the true power. Or do they? Whence came their swords? Why do *they* obey?” Varys smiled. “Some say knowledge is power. Some tell us that all power comes from the gods. Others say it derives from law. Yet that day on the steps of Baelor’s Sept, our godly High Septon and the lawful Queen Regent and your ever-so-knowledgeable servant were as powerless as any cobbler or cooper in the crowd. Who truly killed Eddard Stark do you think? Joffrey, who gave the command? Ser Ilyn Payne, who swung the sword? Or... another? “

Tyrion cocked his head sideways. “Did you mean to answer your damned riddle, or only to make my head ache worse?”

Varys smiled. “Here, then. Power resides where men *believe* it resides. No more and no less.”

“So power is a mummer’s trick?”

“A shadow on the wall,” Varys murmured, “yet shadows can kill. And oftentimes a very small man can cast a very large shadow.”

Tyrion smiled. “Lord Varys, I am growing strangely fond of you. I may kill you yet, but I think I’d feel sad about it.”

“I will take that as high praise.”

“What are you, Varys?” Tyrion found he truly wanted to know. “A spider, they say.”

“Spies and informers are seldom loved, my lord. I am but a loyal servant of the realm.”

“And a eunuch. Let us not forget that.”

“I seldom do.”

“People have called me a halfman too, yet I think the gods have been kinder to me. I am small, my legs are twisted, and women do not look upon me with any great yearning... yet I’m still a man. Shae is not the first to grace my bed, and one day I may take a wife and sire a son. If the gods are good, he’ll look like his uncle and think like his father. You have no such hope to sustain you. Dwarfs are a jape of the gods... but men make eunuchs. Who cut you, Varys? When and why? Who *are* you, truly?”

The eunuch’s smile never flickered, but his eyes glittered with something that was not laughter. “You are kind to ask, my lord, but my tale is long and sad, and we have treasons to discuss.” He drew a parchment from the sleeve of his robe. “The master of the King’s Galley *White Hart* plots to slip anchor three days hence to offer his sword and ship to Lord Stannis.”

Tyrion sighed. “I suppose we must make some sort of bloody lesson out of the man?”

“Ser Jacelyn could arrange for him to vanish, but a trial before the king would help assure the continued loyalty of the other captains.”

*And keep my royal nephew occupied as well.* “As you say. Put him down for a dose of Joffrey’s justice.”

Varys made a mark on the parchment. “Ser Horas and Ser Hobber Redwyne have bribed a guard to let them out a postern gate, the night after next. Arrangements have been made for them to sail on the Pentoshi galley *Moonrunner*, disguised as oarsmen.”

“Can we *keep* them on those oars for a few years, see how they fancy it?” He smiled. “No, my sister would be distraught to lose such treasured guests. Inform Ser Jacelyn. Seize the man they bribed and explain what an

honor it is to serve as a brother of the Night's Watch. And have men posted around the *Moonrunner*, in case the Redwynes find a second guard short of coin."

"As you will." Another mark on the parchment. "Your man Timett slew a wineseller's son this evening, at a gambling den on the Street of Silver. He accused him of cheating at tiles."

"Was it true?"

"Oh, beyond a doubt."

"Then the honest men of the city owe Timett a debt of gratitude. I shall see that he has the king's thanks."

The eunuch gave a nervous giggle and made another mark. "We also have a sudden plague of holy men. The comet has brought forth all manner of queer priests, preachers, and prophets, it would seem. They beg in the winesinks and pot-shops and foretell doom and destruction to anyone who stops to listen."

Tyrion shrugged. "We are close on the three hundredth year since Aegon's Landing, I suppose it is only to be expected. Let them rant."

"They are spreading fear, my lord."

"I thought that was your job."

Varys covered his mouth with his hand. "You are very cruel to say so. One last matter. Lady Tanda gave a small supper last night. I have the menu and the guest list for your inspection. When the wine was poured, Lord Gyles rose to lift a cup to the king, and Ser Balon Swann was heard to remark, '*We'll need three cups for that.*' Many laughed..."

Tyrion raised a hand. "Enough. Ser Balon made a jest. I am not interested in treasonous table talk, Lord Varys."

"You are as wise as you are gentle, my lord." The parchment vanished up the eunuch's sleeve. "We both have much to do. I shall leave you."

When the eunuch had departed, Tyrion sat for a long time watching the candle and wondering how his sister would take the news of Janos Slynt's dismissal. Not happily, if he was any judge, but beyond sending an angry protest to Lord Tywin in Harrenhal, he did not see what Cersei could hope

to do about it. Tyrion had the City Watch now, plus a hundred-and-a-half fierce clansmen and a growing force of sellswords recruited by Bronn. He would seem well protected.

*Doubtless Eddard Stark thought the same.*

The Red Keep was dark and still when Tyrion left the Small Hall. Bronn was waiting in his solar. “Slynt?” he asked.

“Lord Janos will be sailing for the Wall on the morning tide. Varys would have me believe that I have replaced one of Joffrey’s men with one of my own. More likely, I have replaced Littlefinger’s man with one belonging to Varys, but so be it.”

“You’d best know, Timett killed a man—”

“Varys told me.”

The sellsword seemed unsurprised. “The fool figured a one-eyed man would be easier to cheat. Timett pinned his wrist to the table with a dagger and ripped out his throat barehanded. He has this trick where he stiffens his fingers—”

“Spare me the grisly details, my supper is sitting badly in my belly,” Tyrion said. “How goes your recruiting?”

“Well enough. Three new men tonight.”

“How do you know which ones to hire?”

“I look them over. I question them, to learn where they’ve fought and how well they lie.” Bronn smiled. “And then I give them a chance to kill me, while I do the same for them.”

“Have you killed any?”

“No one we could have used.”

“And if one of them kills you?”

“He’ll be one you’ll want to hire.”

Tyrion was a little drunk, and very tired. “Tell me, Bronn. If I told you to kill a babe... an infant girl, say, still at her mother’s breast... would you do it? Without question?”

“Without question? No.” The sellsword rubbed thumb and forefinger together. “I’d ask how much.”

*And why would I ever need your Allar Deem, Lord Slynt?* Tyrion thought. *I have a hundred of my own.* He wanted to laugh; he wanted to weep; most of all, he wanted Shae.