

TYRION

Pod dressed him for his ordeal in a plush velvet tunic of Lannister crimson and brought him his chain of office. Tyrion left it on the bedside table. His sister disliked being reminded that he was the King's Hand, and he did not wish to inflame the relations between them any further.

Varys caught up with him as he was crossing the yard. "My lord," he said, a little out of breath. "You had best read this at once." He held out a parchment in a soft white hand. "A report from the north."

"Good news or bad?" Tyrion asked.

"That is not for me to judge."

Tyrion unrolled the parchment. He had to squint to read the words in the torchlit yard. "Gods be good," he said softly. "Both of them?"

"I fear so, my lord. It is so sad. So grievous sad. And them so young and innocent."

Tyrion remembered how the wolves had howled when the Stark boy had fallen. *Are they howling now, I wonder?* "Have you told anyone else?" he asked.

"Not as yet, though of course I must."

He rolled up the letter. "I'll tell my sister." He wanted to see how she took the news. He wanted that very much.

The queen looked especially lovely that night. She wore a low-cut gown of deep green velvet that brought out the color of her eyes. Her golden hair tumbled across her bare shoulders, and around her waist was a woven belt studded with emeralds. Tyrion waited until he had been seated and served a cup of wine before thrusting the letter at her. He said not a word. Cersei blinked at him innocently and took the parchment from his hand.

"I trust you're pleased," he said as she read. "You wanted the Stark boy dead, I believe."

Cersei made a sour face. “It was Jaime who threw him from that window, not me. For love, he said, as if that would please me. It was a stupid thing to do, and dangerous besides, but when did our sweet brother ever stop to think?”

“The boy saw you,” Tyrion pointed out.

“He was a child. I could have frightened him into silence.” She looked at the letter thoughtfully. “Why must I suffer accusations every time some Stark stubs his toe? This was Greyjoy’s work, I had nothing to do with it.”

“Let us hope Lady Catelyn believes that.”

Her eyes widened. “She wouldn’t—”

“—kill Jaime? Why not? What would you do if Joffrey and Tommen were murdered?”

“I still hold Sansa!” the queen declared.

“We still hold Sansa,” he corrected her, “and we had best take good care of her. Now where is this supper you’ve promised me, sweet sister?”

Cersei set a tasty table, that could not be denied. They started with a creamy chestnut soup, crusty hot bread, and greens dressed with apples and pine nuts. Then came lamprey pie, honeyed ham, buttered carrots, white beans and bacon, and roast swan stuffed with mushrooms and oysters. Tyrion was exceedingly courteous; he offered his sister the choice portions of every dish, and made certain he ate only what she did. Not that he truly thought she’d poison him, but it never hurt to be careful.

The news about the Starks had soured her, he could see. “We’ve had no word from Bitterbridge?” she asked anxiously as she speared a bit of apple on the point of her dagger and ate it with small, delicate bites.

“None.”

“I’ve never trusted Littlefinger. For enough coin, he’d go over to Stannis in a heartbeat.”

“Stannis Baratheon is too bloody righteous to buy men. Nor would he make a comfortable lord for the likes of Petyr. This war has made for some queer bedfellows, I agree, but those two? No.”

As he carved some slices off the ham, she said, “We have Lady Tanda to thank for the pig.”

“A token of her love?”

“A bribe. She begs leave to return to her castle. Your leave as well as mine. I suspect she fears you’ll arrest her on the road, as you did Lord Gyles.”

“Does she plan to make off with the heir to the throne?” Tyrion served his sister a cut of ham and took one for himself. “I’d sooner she remain. If she wants to feel safe, tell her to bring down her garrison from Stokeworth. As many men as she has.”

“If we need men so badly, why did you send away your savages?” A certain testiness crept into Cersei’s voice.

“It was the best use I could have made of them,” he told her truthfully. “They’re fierce warriors, but not soldiers. In formal battle, discipline is more important than courage. They’ve already done us more good in the kingswood than they would ever have done us on the city walls.”

As the swan was being served, the queen questioned him about the conspiracy of the Antler Men. She seemed more annoyed than afraid. “Why are we plagued with so many treasons? What injury has House Lannister ever done these wretches?”

“None,” said Tyrion, “but they think to be on the winning side... which makes them fools as well as traitors.”

“Are you certain you’ve found them all?”

“Varys says so.” The swan was too rich for his taste.

A line appeared on Cersei’s pale white brow, between those lovely eyes. “You put too much trust in that eunuch.”

“He serves me well.”

“Or so he’d have you believe. You think you’re the only one he whispers secrets to? He gives each of us just enough to convince us that we’d be helpless without him. He played the same game with me, when I first wed Robert. For years, I was convinced I had no truer friend at court,

but now..." She studied his face for a moment. "He says you mean to take the Hound from Joffrey."

Damn Varys. "I need Clegane for more important duties."

"Nothing is more important than the life of the king."

"The life of the king is not at risk. Joff will have brave Ser Osmund guarding him, and Meryn Trant as well." *They're good for nothing better.* "I need Balon Swann and the Hound to lead sorties, to make certain Stannis gets no toehold on our side of the Blackwater."

"Jaime would lead the sorties himself."

"From Riverrun? That's quite a sortie."

"Joff's only a boy."

"A boy who wants to be part of this battle, and for once he's showing some sense. I don't intend to put him in the thick of the fighting, but he needs to be seen. Men fight more fiercely for a king who shares their peril than one who hides behind his mother's skirts."

"He's *thirteen*, Tyrion."

"Remember Jaime at thirteen? If you want the boy to be his father's son, let him play the part. Joff wears the finest armor gold can buy, and he'll have a dozen gold cloaks around him at all times. If the city looks to be in the least danger of falling, I'll have him escorted back to the Red Keep at once."

He had thought that might reassure her, but he saw no sign of pleasure in those green eyes. "*Will the city fall?*"

"No." *But if it does, pray that we can hold the Red Keep long enough for our lord father to march to our relief.*

"You've lied to me before, Tyrion."

"Always with good reason, sweet sister. I want amity between us as much as you do. I've decided to release Lord Gyles." He had kept Gyles safe for just this gesture. "You can have Ser Boros Blount back as well."

The queen's mouth tightened. "Ser Boros can rot at Rosby," she said, "but Tommen—"

“—stays where he is. He’s safer under Lord Jacelyn’s protection than he would ever have been with Lord Gyles.”

Serving men cleared away the swan, hardly touched. Cersei beckoned for the sweet. “I hope you like blackberry tarts.”

“I love all sorts of tarts.”

“Oh, I’ve known that a long while. Do you know why Varys is so dangerous?”

“Are we playing at riddles now? No.”

“He doesn’t have a cock.”

“Neither do you.” *And don’t you just hate that, Cersei?*

“Perhaps I’m dangerous too. You, on the other hand, are as big a fool as every other man. That worm between your legs does half your thinking.”

Tyrion licked the crumbs off his fingers. He did not like his sister’s smile. “Yes, and just now my worm is thinking that perhaps it is time I took my leave.”

“Are you unwell, brother?” She leaned forward, giving him a good look at the top of her breasts. “Suddenly you appear somewhat flustered.”

“Flustered?” Tyrion glanced at the door. He thought he’d heard something outside. He was beginning to regret coming here alone. “You’ve never shown much interest in my cock before.”

“It’s not your cock that interests me, so much as what you stick it in. I don’t depend on the eunuch for everything, as you do. I have my own ways of finding out things... especially things that people don’t want me to know.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Only this—*I have your little whore.*”

Tyrion reached for his wine cup, buying a moment to gather his thoughts. “I thought men were more to your taste.”

“You’re such a droll little fellow. Tell me, have you married this one yet?” When he gave her no answer she laughed and said, “Father will be ever so relieved.”

His belly felt as if it were full of eels. How had she found Shae? Had Varys betrayed him? Or had all his precautions been undone by his impatience the night he rode directly to the manse? “Why should you care who I choose to warm my bed?”

“A Lannister always pays his debts,” she said. “You’ve been scheming against me since the day you came to King’s Landing. You sold Myrcella, stole Tommen, and now you plot to have Joff killed. You want him dead so you can rule through Tommen.”

Well, I can’t say the notion isn’t tempting. “This is madness, Cersei. Stannis will be here in days. You need me.”

“For what? Your great prowess in battle?”

“Bronn’s sellswords will never fight without me,” he lied.

“Oh, I think they will. It’s your gold they love, not your impish wit. Have no fear, though, they won’t be without you. I won’t say I haven’t thought of slitting your throat from time to time, but Jaime would never forgive me if I did.”

“And the whore?” He would not call her by name. *If I can convince her Shae means nothing to me, perhaps...*

“She’ll be treated gently enough, so long as no harm comes to my sons. If Joff should be killed, however, or if Tommen should fall into the hands of our enemies, your little cunt will die more painfully than you can possibly imagine.”

She truly believes I mean to kill my own nephew. “The boys are safe,” he promised her wearily. “Gods be good, Cersei, they’re my own blood! What sort of man do you take me for?”

“A small and twisted one.”

Tyryon stared at the dregs on the bottom of his wine cup. *What would Jaime do in my place?* Kill the bitch, most likely, and worry about the consequences afterward. But Tyryon did not have a golden sword, nor the skill to wield one. He loved his brother’s reckless wrath, but it was their lord father he must try and emulate. *Stone, I must be stone, I must be Casterly Rock, hard and unmovable. If I fail this test, I had as lief seek out*

the nearest grotesquerie. “For all I know, you’ve killed her already,” he said.

“Would you like to see her? I thought you might.” Cersei crossed the room and threw open the heavy oaken door. “Bring in my brother’s whore.”

Ser Osmund’s brothers Osney and Osfryd were peas from the same pod, tall men with hooked noses, dark hair, and cruel smiles. She hung between them, eyes wide and white in her dark face. Blood trickled from her broken lip, and he could see bruises through her torn clothing. Her hands were bound with rope, and they’d gagged her so she could not speak.

“You said she wouldn’t be hurt.”

“She fought.” Unlike his brothers, Osney Kettleblack was clean-shaven, so the scratches showed plainly on his bare cheeks. “Got claws like a shadowcat, this one.”

“Bruises heal,” said Cersei in a bored tone. “The whore will live. So long as Joff does.”

Tyrian wanted to laugh at her. It would have been so sweet, so very very sweet, but it would have given the game away. *You’ve lost, Cersei, and the Kettleblacks are even bigger fools than Bronn claimed.* All he needed to do was say the words.

Instead he looked at the girl’s face and said, “You swear you’ll release her after the battle?”

“If you release Tommen, yes.”

He pushed himself to his feet. “Keep her then, but keep her safe. If these animals think they can use her... well, sweet sister, let me point out that a scale tips two ways.” His tone was calm, flat, uncaring; he’d reached for his father’s voice, and found it. “Whatever happens to her happens to Tommen as well, and that includes the beatings and rapes.” *If she thinks me such a monster, I’ll play the part for her.*

Cersei had not expected that. “You would not dare.”

Tyrian made himself smile, slow and cold. Green and black, his eyes laughed at her. “Dare? I’ll do it myself.”

His sister's hand flashed at his face, but he caught her wrist and bent it back until she cried out. Osfryd moved to her rescue. "One more step and I'll break her arm," the dwarf warned him. The man stopped. "You remember when I said you'd never hit me again, Cersei?" He shoved her to the floor and turned back to the Kettleblacks. "Untie her and remove that gag."

The rope had been so tight as to cut off the blood to her hands. She cried out in pain as the circulation returned. Tyrion massaged her fingers gently until feeling returned. "Sweetling," he said, "you must be brave. I am sorry they hurt you."

"I know you'll free me, my lord."

"I will," he promised, and Alayaya bent over and kissed him on the brow. Her broken lips left a smear of blood on his forehead. *A bloody kiss is more than I deserve*, Tyrion thought. *She would never have been hurt but for me.*

Her blood still marked him as he looked down at the queen. "I have never liked you, Cersei, but you were my own sister, so I never did you harm. You've ended that. I will hurt you for this. I don't know how yet, but give me time. A day will come when you think yourself safe and happy, and suddenly your joy will turn to ashes in your mouth, and you'll know the debt is paid." In war, his father had told him once, the battle is over in the instant one army breaks and flees. No matter that they're as numerous as they were a moment before, still armed and armored; once they had run before you they would not turn to fight again. So it was with Cersei. "Get out!" was all the answer she could summon. "Get out of my sight!"

Tyrion bowed. "Good night, then. And pleasant dreams."

He made his way back to the Tower of the Hand with a thousand armored feet marching through his skull. *I ought to have seen this coming the first time I slipped through the back of Chataya's wardrobe*. Perhaps he had not wanted to see. His legs were aching badly by the time he had made the climb. He sent Pod for a flagon of wine and pushed his way into his bedchamber.

Shae sat cross-legged in the canopied bed, nude but for the heavy golden chain that looped across the swell of her breasts: a chain of linked golden hands, each clasping the next.

Tyrion had not expected her. “What are you doing here?”

Laughing, she stroked the chain. “I wanted some hands on my titties... but these little gold ones are cold.”

For a moment he did know what to say. How could he tell her that another woman had taken the beating meant for her, and might well die in her place should some mischance of battle fell Joffrey? He wiped Alayaya’s blood from his brow with the heel of his hand. “The Lady Lollys—”

“She’s asleep. Sleep’s all she ever wants to do, the great cow. She sleeps and she eats. Sometimes she falls asleep while she’s eating. The food falls under the blankets and she *rolls* in it, and I have to clean her.” She made a disgusted face. “All they did was *fuck* her.”

“Her mother says she’s sick.”

“She has a baby in her belly, that’s all.”

Tyrion gazed around the room. Everything seemed much as he left it. “How did you enter? Show me the hidden door.”

She gave a shrug. “Lord Varys made me wear a hood. I couldn’t see, except... there was one place, I got a peep at the floor out the bottom of the hood. It was all tiles, you know, the kind that make a picture?”

“A mosaic?”

Shae nodded. “They were colored red and black. I think the picture was a dragon. Otherwise, everything was dark. We went down a ladder and walked a long ways, until I was all twisted around. Once we stopped so he could unlock an iron gate. I brushed against it when we went through. The dragon was past the gate. Then we went up another ladder, with a tunnel at the top. I had to stoop, and I think Lord Varys was crawling.”

Tyrion made a round of the bedchamber. One of the sconces looked loose. He stood on his toes and tried to turn it. It revolved slowly, scraping against the stone wall. When it was upside down, the stub of the candle fell

out. The rushes scattered across the cold stone floor did not show any particular disturbance. “Doesn’t m’lord want to bed me?” asked Shae.

“In a moment.” Tyrion threw open his wardrobe, shoved the clothing aside, and pushed against the rear panel. What worked for a whorehouse might work for a castle as well... but no, the wood was solid, unyielding. A stone beside the window seat drew his eye, but all his tugging and prodding went for naught. He returned to the bed frustrated and annoyed.

Shae undid his laces and threw her arms around his neck. “Your shoulders feel as hard as rocks,” she murmured. “Hurry, I want to feel you inside me.” Yet as her legs locked around his waist, his manhood left him. When she felt him go soft, Shae slid down under the sheets and took him in her mouth, but even that could not rouse him.

After a few moments he stopped her. “What’s wrong?” she asked. All the sweet innocence of the world was written there in the lines of her young face.

Innocence? Fool, she’s a whore, Cersei was right, you think with your cock, fool, fool.

“Just go to sleep, sweetling,” he urged, stroking her hair. Yet long after Shae had taken his advice, Tyrion himself still lay awake, his fingers cupped over one small breast as he listened to her breathing.