

TYRION

As he stood in the predawn chill watching Chiggen butcher his horse, Tyrion Lannister chalked up one more debt owed the Starks. Steam rose from inside the carcass when the squat sellsword opened the belly with his skinning knife. His hands moved deftly, with never a wasted cut; the work had to be done quickly, before the stink of blood brought shadowcats down from the heights.

“None of us will go hungry tonight,” Bronn said. He was near a shadow himself; bone thin and bone hard, with black eyes and black hair and a stubble of beard.

“Some of us may,” Tyrion told him. “I am not fond of eating horse. Particularly *my* horse.”

“Meat is meat,” Bronn said with a shrug. “The Dothraki like horse more than beef or pork.”

“Do you take me for a Dothraki?” Tyrion asked sourly. The Dothraki ate horse, in truth; they also left deformed children out for the feral dogs who ran behind their *khalasars*. Dothraki customs had scant appeal for him.

Chiggen sliced a thin strip of bloody meat off the carcass and held it up for inspection. “Want a taste, dwarf?”

“My brother Jaime gave me that mare for my twenty-third name day,” Tyrion said in a flat voice.

“Thank him for us, then. If you ever see him again.” Chiggen grinned, showing yellow teeth, and swallowed the raw meat in two bites. “Tastes well bred.”

“Better if you fry it up with onions,” Bronn put in.

Wordlessly, Tyrion limped away. The cold had settled deep in his bones, and his legs were so sore he could scarcely walk. Perhaps his dead mare was the lucky one. He had hours more riding ahead of him, followed by a few mouthfuls of food and a short, cold sleep on hard ground, and then another night of the same, and another, and another, and the gods only knew

how it would end. “Damn her,” he muttered as he struggled up the road to rejoin his captors, remembering, “damn her and all the Starks.”

The memory was still bitter. One moment he’d been ordering supper, and an eye blink later he was facing a room of armed men, with Jyck reaching for a sword and the fat innkeep shrieking, “No swords, not *here*, please, m’lords.”

Tyrion wrenched down Jyck’s arm hurriedly, before he got them both hacked to pieces. “Where are your courtesies, Jyck? Our good hostess said no swords. Do as she asks.” He forced a smile that must have looked as queasy as it felt. “You’re making a sad mistake, Lady Stark. I had no part in any attack on your son. On my honor—”

“Lannister honor,” was all she said. She held up her hands for all the room to see. “His dagger left these scars. The blade he sent to open my son’s throat.”

Tyrion felt the anger all around him, thick and smoky, fed by the deep cuts in the Stark woman’s hands. “Kill him,” hissed some drunken slattern from the back, and other voices took up the call, faster than he would have believed. Strangers all, friendly enough only a moment ago, and yet now they cried for his blood like hounds on a trail.

Tyrion spoke up loudly, trying to keep the quaver from his voice. “If Lady Stark believes I have some crime to answer for, I will go with her and answer for it.”

It was the only possible course. Trying to cut their way out of this was a sure invitation to an early grave. A good dozen swords had responded to the Stark woman’s plea for help: the Harrenhal man, the three Brackens, a pair of unsavory sellswords who looked as though they’d kill him as soon as spit, and some fool field hands who doubtless had no idea what they were doing. Against that, what did Tyrion have? A dagger at his belt, and two men. Jyck swung a fair enough sword, but Morrec scarcely counted; he was part groom, part cook, part body servant, and no soldier. As for Yoren, whatever his feelings might have been, the black brothers were sworn to take no part in the quarrels of the realm. Yoren would do nothing.

And indeed, the black brother stepped aside silently when the old knight by Catelyn Stark's side said, "Take their weapons," and the sellsword Bronn stepped forward to pull the sword from Jyck's fingers and relieve them all of their daggers. "Good," the old man said as the tension in the common room ebbed palpably, "excellent." Tyrion recognized the gruff voice; Winterfell's master-at-arms, shorn of his whiskers.

Scarlet-tinged spittle flew from the fat innkeep's mouth as she begged of Catelyn Stark, "Don't kill him here!"

"Don't kill him anywhere," Tyrion urged.

"Take him somewheres else, no blood here, m'lady, I wants no high lordlin's quarrels."

"We are taking him back to Winterfell," she said, and Tyrion thought, *Well, perhaps...* By then he'd had a moment to glance over the room and get a better idea of the situation. He was not altogether displeased by what he saw. Oh, the Stark woman had been clever, no doubt of it. Force them to make a public affirmation of the oaths sworn her father by the lords they served, and then call on them for succor, and her a woman, yes, that was sweet. Yet her success was not as complete as she might have liked. There were close to fifty in the common room by his rough count. Catelyn Stark's plea had roused a bare dozen; the others looked confused, or frightened, or sullen. Only two of the Freys had stirred, Tyrion noted, and they'd sat back down quick enough when their captain failed to move. He might have smiled if he'd dared.

"Winterfell it is, then," he said instead. That was a long ride, as he could well attest, having just ridden it the other way. So many things could happen along the way. "My father will wonder what has become of me," he added, catching the eye of the swordsman who'd offered to yield up his room. "He'll pay a handsome reward to any man who brings him word of what happened here today." Lord Tywin would do no such thing, of course, but Tyrion would make up for it if he won free.

Ser Rodrik glanced at his lady, his look worried, as well it might be. "His men come with him," the old knight announced. "And we'll thank the rest of you to stay quiet about what you've seen here."

It was all Tyrion could do not to laugh. *Quiet?* The old fool. Unless he took the whole inn, the word would begin to spread the instant they were gone. The freerider with the gold coin in his pocket would fly to Casterly Rock like an arrow. If not him, then someone else. Yoren would carry the story south. That fool singer might make a lay of it. The Freys would report back to their lord, and the gods only knew what he might do. Lord Walder Frey might be sworn to Riverrun, but he was a cautious man who had lived a long time by making certain he was always on the winning side. At the very least he would send his birds winging south to King's Landing, and he might well dare more than that.

Catelyn Stark wasted no time. "We must ride at once. We'll want fresh mounts, and provisions for the road. You men, know that you have the eternal gratitude of House Stark. If any of you choose to help us guard our captives and get them safe to Winterfell, I promise you shall be well rewarded." That was all it took; the fools came rushing forward. Tyrion studied their faces; they would indeed be well rewarded, he vowed to himself, but perhaps not quite as they imagined.

Yet even as they were bundling him outside, saddling the horses in the rain, and tying his hands with a length of coarse rope, Tyrion Lannister was not truly afraid. They would never get him to Winterfell, he would have given odds on that. Riders would be after them within the day, birds would take wing, and surely one of the river lords would want to curry favor with his father enough to take a hand. Tyrion was congratulating himself on his subtlety when someone pulled a hood down over his eyes and lifted him up onto a saddle.

They set out through the rain at a hard gallop, and before long Tyrion's thighs were cramped and aching and his butt throbbed with pain. Even when they were safely away from the inn, and Catelyn Stark slowed them to a trot, it was a miserable pounding journey over rough ground, made worse by his blindness. Every twist and turn put him in danger of falling off his horse. The hood muffled sound, so he could not make out what was being said around him, and the rain soaked through the cloth and made it cling to his face, until even breathing was a struggle. The rope chafed his

wrists raw and seemed to grow tighter as the night wore on. *I was about to settle down to a warm fire and a roast fowl, and that wretched singer had to open his mouth*, he thought mournfully. The wretched singer had come along with them. “There is a great song to be made from this, and I’m the one to make it,” he told Catelyn Stark when he announced his intention of riding with them to see how the “splendid adventure” turned out. Tyrion wondered whether the boy would think the adventure quite so splendid once the Lannister riders caught up with them.

The rain had finally stopped and dawn light was seeping through the wet cloth over his eyes when Catelyn Stark gave the command to dismount. Rough hands pulled him down from his horse, untied his wrists, and yanked the hood off his head. When he saw the narrow stony road, the foothills rising high and wild all around them, and the jagged snowcapped peaks on the distant horizon, all the hope went out of him in a rush. “This is the high road,” he gasped, looking at Lady Stark with accusation. “The *eastern* road. You said we were riding for Winterfell!”

Catelyn Stark favored him with the faintest of smiles. “Often and loudly,” she agreed. “No doubt your friends will ride that way when they come after us. I wish them good speed.”

Even now, long days later, the memory filled him with a bitter rage. All his life Tyrion had prided himself on his cunning, the only gift the gods had seen fit to give him, and yet this seven-times-damned she-wolf Catelyn Stark had outwitted him at every turn. The knowledge was more galling than the bare fact of his abduction.

They stopped only as long as it took to feed and water the horses, and then they were off again. This time Tyrion was spared the hood. After the second night they no longer bound his hands, and once they had gained the heights they scarcely bothered to guard him at all. It seemed they did not fear his escape. And why should they? Up here the land was harsh and wild, and the high road little more than a stony track. If he did run, how far could he hope to go, alone and without provisions? The shadowcats would make a morsel of him, and the clans that dwelt in the mountain fastnesses were brigands and murderers who bowed to no law but the sword.

Yet still the Stark woman drove them forward relentlessly. He knew where they were bound. He had known it since the moment they pulled off his hood. These mountains were the domain of House Arryn, and the late Hand's widow was a Tully, Catelyn Stark's sister... and no friend to the Lannisters. Tyrion had known the Lady Lysa slightly during her years at King's Landing, and did not look forward to renewing the acquaintance.

His captors were clustered around a stream a short ways down the high road. The horses had drunk their fill of the icy cold water, and were grazing on clumps of brown grass that grew from clefts in the rock. Jyck and Morrec huddled close, sullen and miserable. Mohor stood over them, leaning on his spear and wearing a rounded iron cap that made him look as if he had a bowl on his head. Nearby, Marillion the singer sat oiling his woodharp, complaining of what the damp was doing to his strings.

"We must have some rest, my lady," the hedge knight Ser Willis Wode was saying to Catelyn Stark as Tyrion approached. He was Lady Whent's man, stiff-necked and stolid, and the first to rise to aid Catelyn Stark back at the inn.

"Ser Willis speaks truly, my lady," Ser Rodrik said. "This is the third horse we have lost—"

"We will lose more than horses if we're overtaken by the Lannisters," she reminded them. Her face was windburnt and gaunt, but it had lost none of its determination.

"Small chance of that here," Tyrion put in.

"The lady did not ask your views, dwarf," snapped Kurleket, a great fat oaf with short-cropped hair and a pig's face. He was one of the Brackens, a man-at-arms in the service of Lord Jonos. Tyrion had made a special effort to learn all their names, so he might thank them later for their tender treatment of him. A Lannister always paid his debts. Kurleket would learn that someday, as would his friends Lharys and Mohor, and the good Ser Willis, and the sellswords Bronn and Chiggen. He planned an especially sharp lesson for Marillion, him of the woodharp and the sweet tenor voice, who was struggling so manfully to rhyme *imp* with *gimp* and *limp* so he could make a song of this outrage.

“Let him speak,” Lady Stark commanded.

Tyrian Lannister seated himself on a rock. “By now our pursuit is likely racing across the Neck, chasing your lie up the kingsroad... assuming there is a pursuit, which is by no means certain. Oh, no doubt the word has reached my father... but my father does not love me overmuch, and I am not at all sure that he will bother to bestir himself.” It was only half a lie; Lord Tywin Lannister cared not a fig for his deformed son, but he tolerated no slights on the honor of his House. “This is a cruel land, Lady Stark. You’ll find no succor until you reach the Vale, and each mount you lose burdens the others all the more. Worse, you risk losing *me*. I am small, and not strong, and if I die, then what’s the point?” That was no lie at all; Tyrion did not know how much longer he could endure this pace.

“It might be said that your death *is* the point, Lannister,” Catelyn Stark replied.

“I think not,” Tyrion said. “If you wanted me dead, you had only to say the word, and one of these staunch friends of yours would gladly have given me a red smile.” He looked at Kurleket, but the man was too dim to taste the mockery.

“The Starks do not murder men in their beds.”

“Nor do I,” he said. “I tell you again, I had no part in the attempt to kill your son.”

“The assassin was armed with your dagger.”

Tyrian felt the heat rise in him. “It was not my dagger,” he insisted. “How many times must I swear to that? Lady Stark, whatever you may believe of me, I am not a stupid man. Only a fool would arm a common footpad with his own blade.”

Just for a moment, he thought he saw a flicker of doubt in her eyes, but what she said was, “Why would Petyr lie to me?”

“Why does a bear shit in the woods?” he demanded. “Because it is his nature. Lying comes as easily as breathing to a man like Littlefinger. *You* ought to know that, you of all people.”

She took a step toward him, her face tight. “And what does that mean, Lannister?”

Tyrion cocked his head. “Why, every man at court has heard him tell how he took your maidenhead, my lady.”

“*That is a lie!*” Catelyn Stark said.

“Oh, wicked little imp,” Marillion said, shocked.

Kurleket drew his dirk, a vicious piece of black iron. “At your word, m’lady, I’ll toss his lying tongue at your feet.” His pig eyes were wet with excitement at the prospect.

Catelyn Stark stared at Tyrion with a coldness on her face such as he had never seen. “Petyr Baelish loved me once. He was only a boy. His passion was a tragedy for all of us, but it was real, and pure, and nothing to be made mock of. He wanted my hand. That is the truth of the matter. You are truly an evil man, Lannister.”

“And you are truly a fool, Lady Stark. Littlefinger has never loved anyone but Littlefinger, and I promise you that it is not your *hand* that he boasts of, it’s those ripe breasts of yours, and that sweet mouth, and the heat between your legs.”

Kurleket grabbed a handful of hair and yanked his head back in a hard jerk, baring his throat. Tyrion felt the cold kiss of steel beneath his chin. “Shall I bleed him, my lady?”

“Kill me and the truth dies with me,” Tyrion gasped.

“Let him talk,” Catelyn Stark commanded.

Kurleket let go of Tyrion’s hair, reluctantly.

Tyrion took a deep breath. “How did Littlefinger tell you I came by this dagger of his? Answer me that.”

“You won it from him in a wager, during the tourney on Prince Joffrey’s name day.”

“When my brother Jaime was unhorsed by the Knight of Flowers, that was his story, no?”

“It was,” she admitted. A line creased her brow.

“Riders!”

The shriek came from the wind-carved ridge above them. Ser Rodrik had sent Lharys scrambling up the rock face to watch the road while they took their rest.

For a long second, no one moved. Catelyn Stark was the first to react. “Ser Rodrik, Ser Willis, to horse,” she shouted. “Get the other mounts behind us. Mohor, guard the prisoners—”

“Arm us!” Tyrion sprang to his feet and seized her by the arm. “You will need every sword.”

She knew he was right, Tyrion could see it. The mountain clans cared nothing for the enmities of the great houses; they would slaughter Stark and Lannister with equal fervor, as they slaughtered each other. They might spare Catelyn herself; she was still young enough to bear sons. Still, she hesitated.

“I hear them!” Ser Rodrik called out. Tyrion turned his head to listen, and there it was: hoofbeats, a dozen horses or more, coming nearer. Suddenly everyone was moving, reaching for weapons, running to their mounts.

Pebbles rained down around them as Lharys came springing and sliding down the ridge. He landed breathless in front of Catelyn Stark, an ungainly-looking man with wild tufts of rust-colored hair sticking out from under a conical steel cap. “Twenty men, maybe twenty-five,” he said, breathless. “Milk Snakes or Moon Brothers, by my guess. They must have eyes out, m’lady... hidden watchers... they know we’re here.”

Ser Rodrik Cassel was already ahorse, a longsword in hand. Mohor crouched behind a boulder, both hands on his iron-tipped spear, a dagger between his teeth. “You, singer,” Ser Willis Wode called out. “Help me with this breastplate.” Marillion sat frozen, clutching his woodharp, his face as pale as milk, but Tyrion’s man Morrec bounded quickly to his feet and moved to help the knight with his armor.

Tyrion kept his grip on Catelyn Stark. “You have no choice,” he told her. “Three of us, and a fourth man wasted guarding us... four men can be

the difference between life and death up here.”

“Give me your word that you will put down your swords again after the fight is done.”

“My word?” The hoofbeats were louder now. Tyrion grinned crookedly. “Oh, that you have, my lady... on my honor as a Lannister.”

For a moment he thought she would spit at him, but instead she snapped, “Arm them,” and as quick as that she was pulling away. Ser Rodrik tossed Jyck his sword and scabbard, and wheeled to meet the foe. Morrec helped himself to a bow and quiver, and went to one knee beside the road. He was a better archer than swordsman. And Bronn rode up to offer Tyrion a double-bladed axe.

“I have never fought with an axe.” The weapon felt awkward and unfamiliar in his hands. It had a short haft, a heavy head, a nasty spike on top.

“Pretend you’re splitting logs,” Bronn said, drawing his longsword from the scabbard across his back. He spat, and trotted off to form up beside Chiggen and Ser Rodrik. Ser Willis mounted up to join them, fumbling with his helmet, a metal pot with a thin slit for his eyes and a long black silk plume.

“Logs don’t bleed,” Tyrion said to no one in particular. He felt naked without armor. He looked around for a rock and ran over to where Marillion was hiding. “Move over.”

“Go away!” the boy screamed back at him. “I’m a singer, I want no part of this fight!”

“What, lost your taste for adventure?” Tyrion kicked at the youth until he slid over, and not a moment too soon. A heartbeat later, the riders were on them.

There were no heralds, no banners, no horns nor drums, only the twang of bowstrings as Morrec and Lharys let fly, and suddenly the clansmen came thundering out of the dawn, lean dark men in boiled leather and mismatched armor, faces hidden behind barred halfhelms. In gloved hands were clutched all manner of weapons: longswords and lances and sharpened

scythes, spiked clubs and daggers and heavy iron mauls. At their head rode a big man in a striped shadowskin cloak, armed with a two-handed greatsword.

Ser Rodrik shouted “*Winterfell!*” and rode to meet him, with Bronn and Chiggen beside him, screaming some wordless battle cry. Ser Willis Wode followed, swinging a spiked morningstar around his head. “Harrenhal! Harrenhal!” he sang. Tyrion felt a sudden urge to leap up, brandish his axe, and boom out, “Casterly Rock!” but the insanity passed quickly and he crouched down lower.

He heard the screams of frightened horses and the crash of metal on metal. Chiggen’s sword raked across the naked face of a mailed rider, and Bronn plunged through the clansmen like a whirlwind, cutting down foes right and left. Ser Rodrik hammered at the big man in the shadowskin cloak, their horses dancing round each other as they traded blow for blow. Jyck vaulted onto a horse and galloped bareback into the fray. Tyrion saw an arrow sprout from the throat of the man in the shadowskin cloak. When he opened his mouth to scream, only blood came out. By the time he fell, Ser Rodrik was fighting someone else.

Suddenly Marillion shrieked, covering his head with his woodharp as a horse leapt over their rock. Tyrion scrambled to his feet as the rider turned to come back at them, hefting a spiked maul. Tyrion swung his axe with both hands. The blade caught the charging horse in the throat with a meaty *thunk*, angling upward, and Tyrion almost lost his grip as the animal screamed and collapsed. He managed to wrench the axe free and lurch clumsily out of the way. Marillion was less fortunate. Horse and rider crashed to the ground in a tangle on top of the singer. Tyrion danced back in while the brigand’s leg was still pinned beneath his fallen mount, and buried the axe in the man’s neck, just above the shoulder blades.

As he struggled to yank the blade loose, he heard Marillion moaning under the bodies. “Someone help me,” the singer gasped. “Gods have mercy, I’m *bleeding*.”

“I believe that’s horse blood,” Tyrion said. The singer’s hand came crawling out from beneath the dead animal, scrabbling in the dirt like a

spider with five legs. Tyrion put his heel on the grasping fingers and felt a satisfying crunch. “Close your eyes and pretend you’re dead,” he advised the singer before he hefted the axe and turned away.

After that, things ran together. The dawn was full of shouts and screams and heavy with the scent of blood, and the world had turned to chaos. Arrows hissed past his ear and clattered off the rocks. He saw Bronn unhorsed, fighting with a sword in each hand. Tyrion kept on the fringes of the fight, sliding from rock to rock and darting out of the shadows to hew at the legs of passing horses. He found a wounded clansman and left him dead, helping himself to the man’s halfhelmet. It fit too snugly, but Tyrion was glad of any protection at all. Jyck was cut down from behind while he sliced at a man in front of him, and later Tyrion stumbled over Kurleket’s body. The pig face had been smashed in with a mace, but Tyrion recognized the dirk as he plucked it from the man’s dead fingers. He was sliding it through his belt when he heard a woman’s scream.

Catelyn Stark was trapped against the stone face of the mountain with three men around her, one still mounted and the other two on foot. She had a dagger clutched awkwardly in her maimed hands, but her back was to the rock now and they had penned her on three sides. *Let them have the bitch*, Tyrion thought, *and welcome to her*, yet somehow he was moving. He caught the first man in the back of the knee before they even knew he was there, and the heavy axehead split flesh and bone like rotten wood. *Logs that bleed*, Tyrion thought inanely as the second man came for him. Tyrion ducked under his sword, lashed out with the axe, the man reeled backward... and Catelyn Stark stepped up behind him and opened his throat. The horseman remembered an urgent engagement elsewhere and galloped off suddenly.

Tyrion looked around. The enemy were all vanquished or vanished. Somehow the fighting had ended when he wasn’t looking. Dying horses and wounded men lay all around, screaming or moaning. To his vast astonishment, he was not one of them. He opened his fingers and let the axe *thunk* to the ground. His hands were sticky with blood. He could have

sworn they had been fighting for half a day, but the sun seemed scarcely to have moved at all.

“Your first battle?” Bronn asked later as he bent over Jyck’s body, pulling off his boots. They were good boots, as befit one of Lord Tywin’s men; heavy leather, oiled and supple, much finer than what Bronn was wearing.

Tyrion nodded. “My father will be *so* proud,” he said. His legs were cramping so badly he could scarcely stand. Odd, he had never once noticed the pain during the battle.

“You need a woman now,” Bronn said with a glint in his black eyes. He shoved the boots into his saddlebag. “Nothing like a woman after a man’s been blooded, take my word.”

Chiggen stopped looting the corpses of the brigands long enough to snort and lick his lips.

Tyrion glanced over to where Lady Stark was dressing Ser Rodrik’s wounds. “I’m willing if she is,” he said. The freeriders broke into laughter, and Tyrion grinned and thought, *There’s a start*.

Afterward he knelt by the stream and washed the blood off his face in water cold as ice. As he limped back to the others, he glanced again at the slain. The dead clansmen were thin, ragged men, their horses scrawny and undersized, with every rib showing. What weapons Bronn and Chiggen had left them were none too impressive. Mauls, clubs, a *scythe*... He remembered the big man in the shadowskin cloak who had dueled Ser Rodrik with a two-handed greatsword, but when he found his corpse sprawled on the stony ground, the man was not so big after all, the cloak was gone, and Tyrion saw that the blade was badly notched, its cheap steel spotted with rust. Small wonder the clansmen had left nine bodies on the ground.

They had only three dead; two of Lord Bracken’s men-at-arms, Kurleket and Mohor, and his own man Jyck, who had made such a bold show with his bareback charge. *A fool to the end*, Tyrion thought.

“Lady Stark, I urge you to press on, with all haste,” Ser Willis Wode said, his eyes scanning the ridgetops warily through the slit in his helm. “We drove them off for the moment, but they will not have gone far.”

“We must bury our dead, Ser Willis,” she said. “These were brave men. I will not leave them to the crows and shadowcats.”

“This soil is too stony for digging,” Ser Willis said.

“Then we shall gather stones for cairns.”

“Gather all the stones you want,” Bronn told her, “but do it without me or Chiggen. I’ve better things to do than pile rocks on dead men... breathing, for one.” He looked over the rest of the survivors. “Any of you who hope to be alive come nightfall, ride with us.”

“My lady, I fear he speaks the truth,” Ser Rodrik said wearily. The old knight had been wounded in the fight, a deep gash in his left arm and a spear thrust that grazed his neck, and he sounded his age. “If we linger here, they will be on us again for a certainty, and we may not live through a second attack.”

Tyrion could see the anger in Catelyn’s face, but she had no choice. “May the gods forgive us, then. We will ride at once.”

There was no shortage of horses now. Tyrion moved his saddle to Jyck’s spotted gelding, who looked strong enough to last another three or four days at least. He was about to mount when Lharys stepped up and said, “I’ll take that dirk now, dwarf.”

“Let him keep it.” Catelyn Stark looked down from her horse. “And see that he has his axe back as well. We may have need of it if we are attacked again.”

“You have my thanks, lady,” Tyrion said, mounting up.

“Save them,” she said curtly. “I trust you no more than I did before.” She was gone before he could frame a reply.

Tyrion adjusted his stolen helm and took the axe from Bronn. He remembered how he had begun the journey, with his wrists bound and a hood pulled down over his head, and decided that this was a definite

improvement. Lady Stark could keep her trust; so long as he could keep the axe, he would count himself ahead in the game.

Ser Willis Wode led them out. Bronn took the rear, with Lady Stark safely in the middle, Ser Rodrik a shadow beside her. Marillion kept throwing sullen looks back at Tyrion as they rode. The singer had broken several ribs, his woodharp, and all four fingers on his playing hand, yet the day had not been an utter loss to him; somewhere he had acquired a magnificent shadowskin cloak, thick black fur slashed by stripes of white. He huddled beneath its folds silently, and for once had nothing to say.

They heard the deep growls of shadowcats behind them before they had gone half a mile, and later the wild snarling of the beasts fighting over the corpses they had left behind. Marillion grew visibly pale. Tyrion trotted up beside him. “*Craven*,” he said, “rhymes nicely with *raven*.” He kicked his horse and moved past the singer, up to Ser Rodrik and Catelyn Stark.

She looked at him, lips pressed tightly together.

“As I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted,” Tyrion began, “there is a serious flaw in Littlefinger’s fable. Whatever you may believe of me, Lady Stark, I promise you this—I *never* bet against my family.”