

THE GRIFFIN REBORN

He sent the archers in first.

Black Balaq commanded one thousand bows. In his youth, Jon Connington had shared the disdain most knights had for bowmen, but he had grown wiser in exile. In its own way, the arrow was as deadly as the sword, so for the long voyage he had insisted that Homeless Harry Strickland break Balaq's command into ten companies of one hundred men and place each company upon a different ship.

Six of those ships had stayed together well enough to deliver their passengers to the shores of Cape Wrath (the other four were lagging but would turn up eventually, the Volantenes assured them, but Griff thought it just as likely they were lost or had landed elsewhere), which left the company with six hundred bows. For this, two hundred proved sufficient. "They will try to send out ravens," he told Black Balaq. "Watch the maester's tower. Here." He pointed to the map he had drawn in the mud of their campsite. "Bring down every bird that leaves the castle."

"This we do," replied the Summer Islander.

A third of Balaq's men used crossbows, another third the double-curved horn-and-sinew bows of the east. Better than these were the big yew longbows borne by the archers of Westerosi blood, and best of all were the great bows of goldenheart treasured by Black Balaq himself and his fifty Summer Islanders. Only a dragonbone bow could outrange one made of goldenheart. Whatever bow they carried, all of Balaq's men were sharp-eyed, seasoned veterans who had proved their worth in a hundred battles, raids, and skirmishes. They proved it again at Griffin's Roost.

The castle rose from the shores of Cape Wrath, on a lofty crag of dark red stone surrounded on three sides by the surging waters of Shipbreaker Bay. Its only approach was defended by a gatehouse, behind which lay the long bare ridge the Conningtons called the griffin's throat. To force the throat could be a bloody business, since the ridge exposed the attackers to the

spears, stones, and arrows of defenders in the two round towers that flanked the castle's main gates. And once they reached those gates, the men inside could pour down boiling oil on their heads. Griff expected to lose a hundred men, perhaps more.

They lost four.

The woods had been allowed to encroach on the field beyond the gatehouse, so Franklyn Flowers was able to use the brush for concealment and lead his men within twenty yards of the gates before emerging from the trees with the ram they'd fashioned back at camp. The crash of wood on wood brought two men to the battlements; Black Balaq's archers took down both of them before they could rub the sleep out of their eyes. The gate turned out to be closed but not barred; it gave way at the second blow, and Ser Franklyn's men were halfway up the throat before a warhorn sounded the alarum from the castle proper.

The first raven took flight as their grapnels were arcing above the curtain wall, the second a few moments later. Neither bird had flown a hundred yards before an arrow took it down. A guard inside dumped down a bucket of oil on the first men to reach the gates, but as he'd had no time to heat it, the bucket caused more damage than its contents. Swords were soon ringing in half a dozen places along the battlements. The men of the Golden Company clambered through the merlons and raced along the wallwalks, shouting "*A griffin! A griffin!*," the ancient battle cry of House Connington, which must have left the defenders even more confused.

It was over within minutes. Griff rode up the throat on a white courser beside Homeless Harry Strickland. As they neared the castle, he saw a third raven flap from the maester's tower, only to be feathered by Black Balaq himself. "No more messages," he told Ser Franklyn Flowers in the yard. The next thing to come flying from the maester's tower was the maester. The way his arms were flapping, he might have been mistaken for another bird.

That was the end of all resistance. What guards remained had thrown down their weapons. And quick as that, Griffin's Roost was his again, and Jon Connington was once more a lord.

“Ser Franklyn,” he said, “go through the keep and kitchens and roust out everyone you find. Malo, do the same with the maester’s tower and the armory. Ser Brendel, the stables, sept, and barracks. Bring them out into the yard, and try not to kill anyone who does not insist on dying. We want to win the stormlands, and we won’t do that with slaughter. Be sure you look under the altar of the Mother, there’s a hidden stair there that leads down to a secret bolt-hole. And another under the northwest tower that goes straight down to the sea. No one is to escape.”

“They won’t, m’lord,” promised Franklyn Flowers.

Connington watched them dash off, then beckoned to the Halfmaester. “Haldon, take charge of the rookery. I’ll have messages to send out tonight.”

“Let us hope they left some ravens for us.”

Even Homeless Harry was impressed by the swiftness of their victory. “I never thought that it would be so easy,” the captain-general said, as they walked into the great hall to have a look at the carved and gilded Griffin Seat where fifty generations of Conningtons had sat and ruled.

“It will get harder. So far we have taken them unawares. That cannot last forever, even if Black Balaq brings down every raven in the realm.”

Strickland studied the faded tapestries on the walls, the arched windows with their myriad diamond-shaped panes of red and white glass, the racks of spears and swords and warhammers. “Let them come. This place can stand against twenty times our number, so long as we are well provisioned. And you say there is a way in and out by sea?”

“Below. A hidden cove beneath the crag, which appears only when the tide is out.” But Connington had no intention of “letting them come.” Griffin’s Roost was strong but small, and so long as they sat here they would seem small as well. But there was another castle nearby, vastly larger and impregnable. *Take that, and the realm will shake.* “You must excuse me, Captain-General. My lord father is buried beneath the sept, and it has been too many years since last I prayed for him.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Yet when they parted, Jon Connington did not go to the sept. Instead his steps led him up to the roof of the east tower, the tallest at Griffin’s Roost. As he climbed he remembered past ascents—a hundred with his lord father, who liked to stand and look out over woods and crags and sea and know that all he saw belonged to House Connington, and one (only one!) with Rhaegar Targaryen. Prince Rhaegar was returning from Dorne, and he and his escort had lingered here a fortnight. *He was so young then, and I was younger. Boys, the both of us.* At the welcoming feast, the prince had taken up his silver-stringed harp and played for them. *A song of love and doom,* Jon Connington recalled, *and every woman in the hall was weeping when he put down the harp.* Not the men, of course. Particularly not his own father, whose only love was land. Lord Armond Connington spent the entire evening trying to win the prince to his side in his dispute with Lord Morrigen.

The door to the roof of the tower was stuck so fast that it was plain no one had opened it in years. He had to put his shoulder to it to force it open. But when Jon Connington stepped out onto the high battlements, the view was just as intoxicating as he remembered: the crag with its wind-carved rocks and jagged spires, the sea below growling and worrying at the foot of the castle like some restless beast, endless leagues of sky and cloud, the wood with its autumnal colors. “Your father’s lands are beautiful,” Prince Rhaegar had said, standing right where Jon was standing now. And the boy he’d been had replied, “One day they will all be mine.” *As if that could impress a prince who was heir to the entire realm, from the Arbor to the Wall.*

Griffin’s Roost *had* been his, eventually, if only for a few short years. From here, Jon Connington had ruled broad lands extending many leagues to the west, north, and south, just as his father and his father’s father had before him. But his father and his father’s father had never lost their lands. He had. *I rose too high, loved too hard, dared too much. I tried to grasp a star, overreached, and fell.*

After the Battle of the Bells, when Aerys Targaryen had stripped him of his titles and sent him into exile in a mad fit of ingratitude and suspicion, the

lands and lordship had remained within House Connington, passing to his cousin Ser Ronald, the man whom Jon had made his castellan when he went to King's Landing to attend Prince Rhaegar. Robert Baratheon had completed the destruction of the griffins after the war. Cousin Ronald was permitted to retain his castle and his head, but he lost his lordship, thereafter being merely the Knight of Griffin's Roost, and nine-tenths of his lands were taken from him and parceled out to neighbor lords who had supported Robert's claim.

Ronald Connington had died years before. The present Knight of Griffin's Roost, his son Ronnet, was said to be off at war in the riverlands. That was for the best. In Jon Connington's experience, men would fight for things they felt were theirs, even things they'd gained by theft. He did not relish the notion of celebrating his return by killing one of his own kin. Red Ronnet's sire had been quick to take advantage of his lord cousin's downfall, true, but his son had been a child at the time. Jon Connington did not even hate the late Ser Ronald as much as he might have. The fault was his.

He had lost it all at Stoney Sept, in his arrogance.

Robert Baratheon had been hiding somewhere in the town, wounded and alone. Jon Connington had known that, and he had also known that Robert's head upon a spear would have put an end to the rebellion, then and there. He was young and full of pride. How not? King Aerys had named him Hand and given him an army, and he meant to prove himself worthy of that trust, of Rhaegar's love. He would slay the rebel lord himself and carve a place out for himself in all the histories of the Seven Kingdoms.

And so he swept down on Stoney Sept, closed off the town, and began a search. His knights went house to house, smashed in every door, peered into every cellar. He had even sent men crawling through the sewers, yet somehow Robert still eluded him. The townsfolk were *hiding* him. They moved him from one secret bolt-hole to the next, always one step ahead of the king's men. The whole town was a nest of traitors. At the end they had the usurper hidden in a brothel. What sort of king was that, who would hide behind the skirts of women? Yet whilst the search dragged on, Eddard Stark and Hoster Tully came down upon the town with a rebel army. Bells and

battle followed, and Robert emerged from his brothel with a blade in hand, and almost slew Jon on the steps of the old sept that gave the town its name.

For years afterward, Jon Connington told himself that he was not to blame, that he had done all that any man could do. His soldiers searched every hole and hovel, he offered pardons and rewards, he took hostages and hung them in crow cages and swore that they would have neither food nor drink until Robert was delivered to him. All to no avail. “Tywin Lannister himself could have done no more,” he had insisted one night to Blackheart, during his first year of exile.

“There is where you’re wrong,” Myles Toyne had replied. “Lord Tywin would not have bothered with a search. He would have burned that town and every living creature in it. Men and boys, babes at the breast, noble knights and holy septons, pigs and whores, rats and rebels, he would have burned them all. When the fires guttered out and only ash and cinders remained, he would have sent his men in to find the bones of Robert Baratheon. Later, when Stark and Tully turned up with their host, he would have offered pardons to the both of them, and they would have accepted and turned for home with their tails between their legs.”

He was not wrong, Jon Connington reflected, leaning on the battlements of his forebears. *I wanted the glory of slaying Robert in single combat, and I did not want the name of butcher. So Robert escaped me and cut down Rhaegar on the Trident.* “I failed the father,” he said, “but I will not fail the son.”

By the time Connington made his descent, his men had gathered the castle garrison and surviving smallfolk together in the yard. Though Ser Ronnet was indeed off north somewhere with Jaime Lannister, Griffin’s Roost was not quite bereft of griffins. Amongst the prisoners were Ronnet’s younger brother Raymund, his sister Alynne, and his natural son, a fierce red-haired boy they called Ronald Storm. All would make for useful hostages if and when Red Ronnet should return to try and take back the castle that his father had stolen. Connington ordered them confined to the west tower, under guard. The girl began to cry at that, and the bastard boy tried to bite the spearman closest to him. “Stop it, the both of you,” he snapped at them. “No harm will come to any of you unless Red Ronnet proves an utter fool.”

Only a few of the captives had been in service here when Jon Connington had last been lord: a grizzled serjeant, blind in one eye; a couple of the washerwomen; a groom who had been a stableboy during Robert's Rebellion; the cook, who had grown enormously fat; the castle armorer. Griff had let his beard grow out during the voyage, for the first time in many years, and to his surprise it had come in mostly red, though here and there ash showed amidst the fire. Clad in a long red-and-white tunic embroidered with the twin griffins of his House, counterchanged and combatant, he looked an older, sterner version of the young lord who had been Prince Rhaegar's friend and companion ... but the men and women of Griffin's Roost still looked at him with strangers' eyes.

"Some of you will know me," he told them. "The rest will learn. I am your rightful lord, returned from exile. My enemies have told you I am dead. Those tales are false, as you can see. Serve me as faithfully as you have served my cousin, and no harm need come to any of you."

He brought them forward one by one, asked each man his name, then bid them kneel and swear him their allegiance. It all went swiftly. The soldiers of the garrison—only four had survived the attack, the old serjeant and three boys—laid their swords at his feet. No one balked. No one died.

That night in the great hall the victors feasted on roast meats and fresh-caught fish, washed down with rich red wines from the castle cellars. Jon Connington presided from the Griffin's Seat, sharing the high table with Homeless Harry Strickland, Black Balaq, Franklyn Flowers, and the three young griffins they had taken captive. The children were of his blood and he felt that he should know them, but when the bastard boy announced, "My father's going to kill you," he decided that his knowledge was sufficient, ordered them back to their cells, and excused himself.

Haldon Halfmaester had been absent from the feast. Lord Jon found him in the maester's tower, bent over a pile of parchments, with maps spread out all around him. "Hoping to determine where the rest of the company might be?" Connington asked him.

"Would that I could, my lord."

Ten thousand men had sailed from Volon Therys, with all their weapons, horses, elephants. Not quite half that number had turned up thus far on Westeros, at or near their intended landing site, a deserted stretch of coast on the edge of the rainwood ... lands that Jon Connington knew well, as they had once been his.

Only a few years ago, he would never have dared attempt a landing on Cape Wrath; the storm lords were too fiercely loyal to House Baratheon and to King Robert. But with both Robert and his brother Renly slain, everything was changed. Stannis was too harsh and cold a man to inspire much in the way of loyalty, even if he had not been half a world away, and the stormlands had little reason to love House Lannister. And Jon Connington was not without his own friends here. *Some of the older lords will still remember me, and their sons will have heard the stories. And every man of them will know of Rhaegar, and his young son whose head was smashed against a cold stone wall.*

Fortunately his own ship had been one of the first to reach their destination. Then it had only been a matter of establishing a campsite, assembling his men as they came ashore and moving quickly, before the local lordlings had any inkling of their peril. And there the Golden Company had proved its mettle. The chaos that would inevitably have delayed such a march with a hastily assembled host of household knights and local levies had been nowhere in evidence. These were the heirs of Bittersteel, and discipline was mother's milk to them.

"By this time on the morrow we ought to hold three castles," he said. The force that had taken Griffin's Roost represented a quarter of their available strength; Ser Tristan Rivers had set off simultaneously for the seat of House Morrigen at Crow's Nest, and Laswell Peake for Rain House, the stronghold of the Wylde, each with a force of comparable size. The rest of their men had remained in camp to guard their landing site and prince, under the command of the company's Volantene paymaster, Gorys Edoryen. Their numbers would continue to swell, one hoped; more ships were straggling in every day. "We still have too few horses."

"And no elephants," the Halfmaester reminded him. Not one of the great cogs carrying the elephants had turned up yet. They had last seen them at

Lys, before the storm that had scattered half the fleet. “Horses can be found in Westeros. Elephants—”

“—do not matter.” The great beasts would be useful in a pitched battle, no doubt, but it would be some time before they had the strength to face their foes in the field. “Have those parchments told you anything of use?”

“Oh, much and more, my lord.” Haldon gave him a thin smile. “The Lannisters make enemies easily but seem to have a harder time keeping friends. Their alliance with the Tyrells is fraying, to judge from what I read here. Queen Cersei and Queen Margaery are fighting over the little king like two bitches with a chicken bone, and both have been accused of treason and debauchery. Mace Tyrell has abandoned his siege of Storm’s End to march back to King’s Landing and save his daughter, leaving only a token force behind to keep Stannis’s men penned up inside the castle.”

Connington sat. “Tell me more.”

“In the north the Lannisters are relying on the Boltons and in the riverlands upon the Freys, both houses long renowned for treachery and cruelty. Lord Stannis Baratheon remains in open rebellion and the ironborn of the islands have raised up a king as well. No one ever seems to mention the Vale, which suggests to me that the Arryns have taken no part in any of this.”

“And Dorne?” The Vale was far away; Dorne was close. “Prince Doran’s younger son has been betrothed to Myrcella Baratheon, which would suggest that the Dornishmen have thrown in with House Lannister, but they have an army in the Boneway and another in the Prince’s Pass, just waiting ...”

“Waiting.” He frowned. “For what?” Without Daenerys and her dragons, Dorne was central to their hopes. “Write Sunspear. Doran Martell must know that his sister’s son is still alive and has come home to claim his father’s throne.”

“As you say, my lord.” The Halfmaester glanced at another parchment. “We could scarcely have timed our landing better. We have potential friends and allies at every hand.”

“But no dragons,” said Jon Connington, “so to win these allies to our cause, we must needs have something to offer them.”

“Gold and land are the traditional incentives.”

“Would that we had either. Promises of land and promises of gold may suffice for some, but Strickland and his men will expect first claim on the choicest fields and castles, those that were taken from their forebears when they fled into exile. No.”

“My lord does have one prize to offer,” Haldon Halfmaester pointed out. “Prince Aegon’s hand. A marriage alliance, to bring some great House to our banners.”

A bride for our bright prince. Jon Connington remembered Prince Rhaegar’s wedding all too well. *Elia was never worthy of him. She was frail and sickly from the first, and childbirth only left her weaker.* After the birth of Princess Rhaenys, her mother had been bedridden for half a year, and Prince Aegon’s birth had almost been the death of her. She would bear no more children, the maesters told Prince Rhaegar afterward.

“Daenerys Targaryen may yet come home one day,” Connington told the Halfmaester. “Aegon must be free to marry her.”

“My lord knows best,” said Haldon. “In that case, we might consider offering potential friends a lesser prize.”

“What would you suggest?”

“You. You are unwed. A great lord, still virile, with no heirs except these cousins we have just now dispossessed, the scion of an ancient House with a fine stout castle and wide, rich lands that will no doubt be restored and perhaps expanded by a grateful king, once we have triumphed. You have a name as a warrior, and as King Aegon’s Hand you will speak with his voice and rule this realm in all but name. I would think that many an ambitious lord might be eager to wed his daughter to such a man. Even, perhaps, the prince of Dorne.”

Jon Connington's answer was a long cold stare. There were times when the Halfmaester vexed him almost as much as that dwarf had. "I think not." *Death is creeping up my arm. No man must ever know, nor any wife.* He got back to his feet. "Prepare the letter to Prince Doran."

"As my lord commands."

Jon Connington slept that night in the lord's chambers, in the bed that had once been his father's, beneath a dusty canopy of red-and-white velvet. He woke at dawn to the sound of falling rain and the timid knock of a serving man anxious to learn how his new lord would break his fast. "Boiled eggs, fried bread, and beans. And a jug of wine. The worst wine in the cellar."

"The ... the *worst*, m'lord?"

"You heard me."

When the food and wine had been brought up, he barred the door, emptied the jug into a bowl, and soaked his hand in it. Vinegar soaks and vinegar baths were the treatment Lady Lemoire had prescribed for the dwarf, when she feared he might have greyscale, but asking for a jug of vinegar each morning would give the game away. Wine would need to serve, though he saw no sense in wasting a good vintage. The nails on all four fingers were black now, though not yet on his thumb. On the middle finger, the grey had crept up past the second knuckle. *I should hack them off*, he thought, *but how would I explain two missing fingers?* He dare not let the greyscale become known. Queer as it seemed, men who would cheerfully face battle and risk death to rescue a companion would abandon that same companion in a heartbeat if he were known to have greyscale. *I should have let the damned dwarf drown.*

Later that day, garbed and gloved once more, Connington made an inspection of the castle and sent word to Homeless Harry Strickland and his captains to join him for a war council. Nine of them assembled in the solar: Connington and Strickland, Haldon Halfmaester, Black Balaq, Ser Franklyn Flowers, Malo Jayn, Ser Brendel Byrne, Dick Cole, and Lymond Pease. The Halfmaester had good tidings. "Word's reached the camp from Marq

Mandrake. The Volantenes put him ashore on what turned out to be Estermont, with close to five hundred men. He's taken Greenstone."

Estermont was an island off Cape Wrath, never one of their objectives. "The damned Volantenes are so eager to be rid of us they are dumping us ashore on any bit of land they see," said Franklyn Flowers. "I'll wager you that we've got lads scattered all over half the bloody Stepstones too."

"With my elephants," Harry Strickland said, in a mournful tone. He missed his elephants, did Homeless Harry.

"Mandrake had no archers with him," said Lymond Pease. "Do we know if Greenstone got off any ravens before it fell?"

"I expect they did," said Jon Connington, "but what messages would they have carried? At best, some garbled account of raiders from the sea." Even before they had sailed from Volon Therys, he had instructed his captains to show no banners during these first attacks—not Prince Aegon's three-headed dragon, nor his own griffins, nor the skulls and golden battle standards of the company. Let the Lannisters suspect Stannis Baratheon, pirates from the Stepstones, outlaws out of the woods, or whoever else they cared to blame. If the reports that reached King's Landing were confused and contradictory, so much the better. The slower the Iron Throne was to react, the longer they would have to gather their strength and bring allies to the cause. There should be ships on Estermont. It *is* an island. Haldon, send word to Mandrake to leave a garrison behind and bring the rest of his men over to Cape Wrath, along with any noble captives."

"As you command, my lord. House Estermont has blood ties to both kings, as it happens. Good hostages."

"Good ransoms," said Homeless Harry, happily. "It is time we sent for Prince Aegon as well," Lord Jon announced.

"He will be safer here behind the walls of Griffin's Roost than back at camp."

“I’ll send a rider,” said Franklyn Flowers, “but the lad won’t much like the idea of staying safe, I tell you that. He wants to be in the thick o’ things.”

So did we all at his age, Lord Jon thought, remembering. “Has the time come to raise his banner?” asked Pease. “Not yet. Let King’s Landing think this is no more than an exile lord coming home with some hired swords to reclaim his birthright. An old familiar story, that. I will even write King Tommen, stating as much and asking for a pardon and the restoration of my lands and titles. That will give them something to chew over for a while. And whilst they dither, we will send out word secretly to likely friends in the stormlands and the Reach. And Dorne.” That was the crucial step. Lesser lords might join their cause for fear of harm or hope of gain, but only the Prince of Dorne had the power to defy House Lannister and its allies. “Above all else, we must have Doran Martell.”

“Small chance of that,” said Strickland. “The Dornishman is scared of his own shadow. Not what you call daring.”

No more than you. “Prince Doran is a cautious man, that’s true. He will never join us unless he is convinced that we will win. So to persuade him we must show our strength.”

“If Peake and Rivers are successful, we will control the better part of Cape Wrath,” argued Strickland. “Four castles in as many days, that’s a splendid start, but we are still only at half strength. We need to wait for the rest of my men. We are missing horses as well, and the elephants. Wait, I say. Gather our power, win some small lords to our cause, let Lysono Maar dispatch his spies to learn what we can learn of our foes.”

Connington gave the plump captain-general a cool look. *This man is no Blackheart, no Bittersteel, no Maelys. He would wait until all seven hells were frozen if he could rather than risk another bout of blisters*. “We did not cross half the world to wait. Our best chance is to strike hard and fast, before King’s Landing knows who we are. I mean to take Storm’s End. A nigh-impregnable stronghold, and Stannis Baratheon’s last foothold in the south. Once taken, it will give us a secure fastness to which we may retreat at need, and winning it will prove our strength.”

The captains of the Golden Company exchanged glances. “If Storm’s End is still held by men loyal to Stannis, we will be taking it from him, not the Lannisters,” objected Brendel Byrne. “Why not make common cause with him against the Lannisters?”

“Stannis is Robert’s brother, of that same ilk that brought down House Targaryen,” Jon Connington reminded him. “Moreover, he is a thousand leagues away, with whatever meagre strength he still commands. The whole realm lies between us. It would take half a year just to reach him, and he has little and less to offer us.”

“If Storm’s End is so impregnable, how do you mean to take it?” asked Malo.

“By guile.”

Homeless Harry Strickland disagreed. “We should wait.”

“We shall.” Jon Connington stood. “Ten days. No longer. It will take that long to prepare. On the morning of the eleventh day, we ride for Storm’s End.”

The prince arrived to join them four days later, riding at the head of a column of a hundred horse, with three elephants lumbering in his rear. Lady Lemoire was with him, garbed once more in the white robes of a septa. Before them went Ser Rolly Duckfield, a snow-white cloak streaming from his shoulders.

A solid man, and true, Connington thought as he watched Duck dismount, *but not worthy of the Kingsguard.* He had tried his best to dissuade the prince from giving Duckfield that cloak, pointing out that the honor might best be held in reserve for warriors of greater renown whose fealty would add luster to their cause, and the younger sons of great lords whose support they would need in the coming struggle, but the boy would not be moved. “Duck will die for me if need be,” he had said, “and that’s all I require in my Kingsguard. The Kingslayer was a warrior of great renown, and the son of a great lord as well.”

At least I convinced him to leave the other six slots open, else Duck might have six ducklings trailing after him, each more blindingly adequate than the last. “Escort His Grace to my solar,” he commanded. “At once.”

Prince Aegon Targaryen was not near as biddable as the boy Young Griff had been, however. The better part of an hour had passed before he finally turned up in the solar, with Duck at his side. “Lord Connington,” he said, “I like your castle.”

“Your father’s lands are beautiful,” he said. His silvery hair was blowing in the wind, and his eyes were a deep purple, darker than this boy’s. “As do I, Your Grace. Please, be seated. Ser Rolly, we’ll have no further need of you for now.”

“No, I want Duck to stay.” The prince sat. “We’ve been talking with Strickland and Flowers. They told us about this attack on Storm’s End that you’re planning.”

Jon Connington did not let his fury show. “And did Homeless Harry try to persuade you to delay it?”

“He did, actually,” the prince said, “but I won’t. Harry’s an old maid, isn’t he? You have the right of it, my lord. I want the attack to go ahead ... with one change. I mean to lead it.”