

TYRION

The girl never wept. Young as she was, Myrcella Baratheon was a princess born. *And a Lannister, despite her name*, Tyrion reminded himself, *as much Jaime's blood as Cersei's*.

To be sure, her smile was a shade tremulous when her brothers took their leave of her on the deck of the *Seaswift*, but the girl knew the proper words to say, and she said them with courage and dignity. When the time came to part, it was Prince Tommen who cried, and Myrcella who gave him comfort.

Tyrion looked down upon the farewells from the high deck of *King Robert's Hammer*, a great war galley of four hundred oars. *Rob's Hammer*, as her oarsmen called her, would form the main strength of Myrcella's escort. *Lionstar*, *Bold Wind*, and *Lady Lyanna* would sail with her as well.

It made Tyrion more than a little uneasy to detach so great a part of their already inadequate fleet, depleted as it was by the loss of all those ships that had sailed with Lord Stannis to Dragonstone and never returned, but Cersei would hear of nothing less. Perhaps she was wise. If the girl was captured before she reached Sunspear, the Dornish alliance would fall to pieces. So far Doran Martell had done no more than call his banners. Once Myrcella was safe in Braavos, he had pledged to move his strength to the high passes, where the threat might make some of the Marcher lords rethink their loyalties and give Stannis pause about marching north. It was purely a feint, however. The Martells would not commit to actual battle unless Dorne itself was attacked, and Stannis was not so great a fool. *Though some of his bannermen may be*, Tyrion reflected. *I should think on that*.

He cleared his throat. "You know your orders, Captain."

"I do, my lord. We are to follow the coast, staying always in sight of land, until we reach Crackclaw Point. From there we are to strike out across the narrow sea for Braavos. On no account are we to sail within sight of Dragonstone."

“And if our foes should chance upon you nonetheless?”

“If a single ship, we are to run them off or destroy them. If there are more, the *Bold Wind* will cleave to the *Seaswift* to protect her while the rest of the fleet does battle.”

Tyrion nodded. If the worst happened, the little *Seaswift* ought to be able to outrun pursuit. A small ship with big sails, she was faster than any warship afloat, or so her captain had claimed. Once Myrcella reached Braavos, she ought to be safe. He was sending Ser Arys Oakheart as her sworn shield, and had engaged the Braavosi to bring her the rest of the way to Sunspear. Even Lord Stannis would hesitate to wake the anger of the greatest and most powerful of the Free Cities. Traveling from King’s Landing to Dorne by way of Braavos was scarcely the most direct of routes, but it *was* the safest... or so he hoped.

If Lord Stannis knew of this sailing, he could not choose a better time to send his fleet against us. Tyrion glanced back to where the Rush emptied out into Blackwater Bay and was relieved to see no signs of sails on the wide green horizon. At last report, the Baratheon fleet still lay off Storm’s End, where Ser Cortnay Penrose continued to defy the besiegers in dead Renly’s name. Meanwhile, Tyrion’s winch towers stood three-quarters complete. Even now men were hoisting heavy blocks of stone into place, no doubt cursing him for making them work through the festivities. Let them curse. *Another fortnight, Stannis, that’s all I require. Another fortnight and it will be done.*

Tyrion watched his niece kneel before the High Septon to receive his blessing on her voyage. Sunlight caught in his crystal crown and spilled rainbows across Myrcella’s upturned face. The noise from the riverside made it impossible to hear the prayers. He hoped the gods had sharper ears. The High Septon was as fat as a house, and more pompous and long of wind than even Pycelle. *Enough, old man, make an end to it,* Tyrion thought irritably. *The gods have better things to do than listen to you, and so do I.*

When at last the droning and mumbling was done, Tyrion took his farewell of the captain of *Rob’s Hammer*. “Deliver my niece safely to

Braavos, and there will be a knighthood waiting for you on your return,” he promised.

As he made his way down the steep plank to the quay, Tyrion could feel unkind eyes upon him. The galley rocked gently and the movement underfoot made his waddle worse than ever. *I’ll wager they’d love to snigger.* No one dared, not openly, though he heard mutterings mingled with the creak of wood and rope and the rush of the river around the pilings. *They do not love me,* he thought. *Well, small wonder. I’m well fed and ugly, and they are starving.*

Bronn escorted him through the crowd to join his sister and her sons. Cersei ignored him, preferring to lavish her smiles on their cousin. He watched her charming Lancel with eyes as green as the rope of emeralds around her slim white throat, and smiled a small sly smile to himself. *I know your secret, Cersei,* he thought. His sister had oft called upon the High Septon of late, to seek the blessings of the gods in their coming struggle with Lord Stannis... or so she would have him believe. In truth, after a brief call at the Great Sept of Baelor, Cersei would don a plain brown traveler’s cloak and steal off to meet a certain hedge knight with the unlikely name of Ser Osmund Kettleblack, and his equally unsavory brothers Osney and Osfryd. Lancel had told him all about them. Cersei meant to use the Kettleblacks to buy her own force of sellswords.

Well, let her enjoy her plots. She was much sweeter when she thought she was outwitting him. The Kettleblacks would charm her, take her coin, and promise her anything she asked, and why not, when Bronn was matching every copper penny, coin for coin? Amiable rogues all three, the brothers were in truth much more skilled at deceit than they’d ever been at bloodletting. Cersei had managed to buy herself three hollow drums; they would make all the fierce booming sounds she required, but there was nothing inside. It amused Tyrion no end.

Horns blew fanfares as *Lionstar* and *Lady Lyanna* pushed out from shore, moving downriver to clear the way for *Seaswift*. A few cheers went up from the crush along the banks, as thin and ragged as the clouds scuttling overhead. Myrcella smiled and waved from the deck. Behind her stood

Arys Oakheart, his white cloak streaming. The captain ordered lines cast off, and oars pushed the *Seaswift* out into the lusty current of the Blackwater Rush, where her sails blossomed in the wind—common white sails, as Tyrion had insisted, not sheets of Lannister crimson. Prince Tommen sobbed. “You mew like a suckling babe,” his brother hissed at him. “Princes aren’t supposed to cry.”

“Prince Aemon the Dragonknight cried the day Princess Naerys wed his brother Aegon,” Sansa Stark said, “and the twins Ser Arryk and Ser Erryk died with tears on their cheeks after each had given the other a mortal wound.”

“Be quiet, or I’ll have Ser Meryn give *you* a mortal wound,” Joffrey told his betrothed. Tyrion glanced at his sister, but Cersei was engrossed in something Ser Balon Swann was telling her. *Can she truly be so blind as to what he is?* he wondered.

Out on the river, *Bold Wind* unshipped her oars and glided downstream in the wake of *Seaswift*. Last came *King Robert’s Hammer*, the might of the royal fleet... or at least that portion that had not fled to Dragonstone last year with Stannis. Tyrion had chosen the ships with care, avoiding any whose captains might be of doubtful loyalty, according to Varys... but as Varys himself was of doubtful loyalty, a certain amount of apprehension remained. *I rely too much on Varys*, he reflected. *I need my own informers. Not that I’d trust them either.* Trust would get you killed.

He wondered again about Littlefinger. There had been no word from Petyr Baelish since he had ridden off for Bitterbridge. That might mean nothing—or everything. Even Varys could not say. The eunuch had suggested that perhaps Littlefinger had met some misfortune on the roads. He might even be slain. Tyrion had snorted in derision. “If Littlefinger is dead, then I’m a giant.” More likely, the Tyrells were balking at the proposed marriage. Tyrion could scarcely blame them. *If I were Mace Tyrell, I would sooner have Joffrey’s head on a pike than his cock in my daughter.*

The little fleet was well out into the bay when Cersei indicated that it was time to go. Bronn brought Tyrion’s horse and helped him mount. That

was Podrick Payne's task, but they had left Pod back at the Red Keep. The gaunt sellsword made for a much more reassuring presence than the boy would have.

The narrow streets were lined by men of the City Watch, holding back the crowd with the shafts of their spears. Ser Jacelyn Bywater went in front, heading a wedge of mounted lancers in black ringmail and golden cloaks. Behind him came Ser Aron Santagar and Ser Balon Swann, bearing the king's banners, the lion of Lannister and crowned stag of Baratheon.

King Joffrey followed on a tall grey palfrey, a golden crown set upon his golden curls. Sansa Stark rode a chesnut mare at his side, looking neither right nor left, her thick auburn hair flowing to her shoulders beneath a net of moonstones. Two of the Kingsguard flanked the couple, the Hound on the king's right hand and Ser Mandon Moore to the left of the Stark girl.

Next came Tommen, snuffling, with Ser Preston Greenfield in his white armor and cloak, and then Cersei, accompanied by Ser Lancel and protected by Meryn Trant and Boros Blount. Tyrion fell in with his sister. After them followed the High Septon in his litter, and a long tail of other courtiers—Ser Horas Redwyne, Lady Tanda and her daughter, Jalabhar Xho, Lord Gyles Rosby, and the rest. A double column of guardsmen brought up the rear.

The unshaven and the unwashed stared at the riders with dull resentment from behind the line of spears. *I like this not one speck*, Tyrion thought. Bronn had a score of sellswords scattered through the crowd with orders to stop any trouble before it started. Perhaps Cersei had similarly disposed her Kettleblacks. Somehow Tyrion did not think it would help much. If the fire was too hot, you could hardly keep the pudding from scorching by tossing a handful of raisins in the pot.

They crossed Fishmonger's Square and rode along Muddy Way before turning onto the narrow, curving Hook to begin their climb up Aegon's High Hill. A few voices raised a cry of "*Joffrey! All hail, all hail!*" as the young king rode by, but for every man who picked up the shout, a hundred kept their silence. The Lannisters moved through a sea of ragged men and hungry women, breasting a tide of sullen eyes. Just ahead of him, Cersei was laughing at something Lancel had said, though he suspected her

merriment was feigned. She could not be oblivious to the unrest around them, but his sister always believed in putting on the brave show.

Halfway along the route, a wailing woman forced her way between two watchmen and ran out into the street in front of the king and his companions, holding the corpse of her dead baby above her head. It was blue and swollen, grotesque, but the real horror was the mother's eyes. Joffrey looked for a moment as if he meant to ride her down, but Sansa Stark leaned over and said something to him. The king fumbled in his purse, and flung the woman a silver stag. The coin bounced off the child and rolled away, under the legs of the gold cloaks and into the crowd, where a dozen men began to fight for it. The mother never once blinked. Her skinny arms were trembling from the dead weight of her son.

"Leave her, Your Grace," Cersei called out to the king, "she's beyond our help, poor thing."

The mother heard her. Somehow the queen's voice cut through the woman's ravaged wits. Her slack face twisted in loathing. "*Whore!*" she shrieked. "*Kingslayer's whore! Brotherfucker!*" Her dead child dropped from her arms like a sack of flour as she pointed at Cersei. "*Brotherfucker brotherfucker brotherfucker.*"

Tyryon never saw who threw the dung. He only heard Sansa's gasp and Joffrey's bellowed curse, and when he turned his head, the king was wiping brown filth from his cheek. There was more caked in his golden hair and spattered over Sansa's legs.

"Who threw that?" Joffrey screamed. He pushed his fingers into his hair, made a furious face, and flung away another handful of dung. "I want the man who threw that!" he shouted. "A hundred golden dragons to the man who gives him up."

"He was up there!" someone shouted from the crowd. The king wheeled his horse in a circle to survey the rooftops and open balconies above them. In the crowd people were pointing, shoving, cursing one another and the king.

"Please, Your Grace, let him go," Sansa pleaded.

The king paid her no heed. “Bring me the man who flung that filth!” Joffrey commanded. “He’ll lick it off me or I’ll have his head. Dog, you bring him here!”

Obedient, Sandor Clegane swung down from his saddle, but there was no way through that wall of flesh, let alone to the roof. Those closest to him began to squirm and shove to get away, while others pushed forward to see. Tyrion smelled disaster. “Clegane, leave off, the man is long fled.”

“I *want* him!” Joffrey pointed at the roof. “He was up there! Dog, cut through them and bring—”

A tumult of sound drowned his last words, a rolling thunder of rage and fear and hatred that engulfed them from all sides. “*Bastard!*” someone screamed at Joffrey, “*bastard monster.*” Other voices flung calls of “*Whore*” and “*Brotherfucker*” at the queen, while Tyrion was pelted with shouts of “*Freak*” and “*Halfman.*” Mixed in with the abuse, he heard a few cries of “*Justice*” and “*Robb, King Robb, the Young Wolf,*” of “*Stannis!*” and even “*Renly!*” From both sides of the street, the crowd surged against the spear shafts while the gold cloaks struggled to hold the line. Stones and dung and fouler things whistled overhead. “Feed us!” a woman shrieked. “Bread!” boomed a man behind her. “*We want bread, bastard!*” In a heartbeat, a thousand voices took up the chant. King Joffrey and King Robb and King Stannis were forgotten, and King Bread ruled alone. “*Bread,*” they clamored. “*Bread, bread!*”

Tyrion spurred to his sister’s side, yelling, “Back to the castle. *Now.*” Cersei gave a curt nod, and Ser Lancel unsheathed his sword. Ahead of the column, Jacelyn Bywater was roaring commands. His riders lowered their lances and drove forward in a wedge. The king was wheeling his palfrey around in anxious circles while hands reached past the line of gold cloaks, grasping for him. One managed to get hold of his leg, but only for an instant. Ser Mandon’s sword slashed down, parting hand from wrist. “*Ride!*” Tyrion shouted at his nephew, giving the horse a sharp *smack* on the rump. The animal reared, trumpeting, and plunged ahead, the press shattering before him.

Tyrion drove into the gap hard on the king's hooves. Bronn kept pace, sword in hand. A jagged rock flew past his head as he rode, and a rotten cabbage exploded against Ser Mandon's shield. To their left, three gold cloaks went down under the surge, and then the crowd was rushing forward, trampling the fallen men. The Hound had vanished behind, though his riderless horse galloped beside them. Tyrion saw Aron Santagar pulled from the saddle, the gold-and-black Baratheon stag torn from his grasp. Ser Balon Swann dropped the Lannister lion to draw his longsword. He slashed right and left as the fallen banner was ripped apart, the thousand ragged pieces swirling away like crimson leaves in a stormwind. In an instant they were gone. Someone staggered in front of Joffrey's horse and shrieked as the king rode him down. Whether it had been man, woman, or child Tyrion could not have said. Joffrey was galloping at his side, whey-faced, with Ser Mandon Moore a white shadow on his left.

And suddenly the madness was behind and they were clattering across the cobbled square that fronted on the castle barbican. A line of spearmen held the gates. Ser Jacelyn was wheeling his lances around for another charge. The spears parted to let the king's party pass under the portcullis. Pale red walls loomed up about them, reassuringly high and aswarm with crossbowmen.

Tyrion did not recall dismounting. Ser Mandon was helping the shaken king off his horse when Cersei, Tommen, and Lancel rode through the gates with Ser Meryn and Ser Boros close behind. Boros had blood smeared along his blade, while Meryn's white cloak had been torn from his back. Ser Balon Swann rode in helmetless, his mount lathered and bleeding at the mouth. Horas Redwyne brought in Lady Tanda, half crazed with fear for her daughter Lollys, who had been knocked from the saddle and left behind. Lord Gyles, more grey of face than ever, stammered out a tale of seeing the High Septon spilled from his litter, screeching prayers as the crowd swept over him. Jalabhar Xho said he thought he'd seen Ser Preston Greenfield of the Kingsguard riding back toward the High Septon's overturned litter, but he was not certain.

Tyrion was dimly aware of a maester asking if he was injured. He pushed his way across the yard to where his nephew stood, his dung-encrusted crown askew. “Traitors,” Joffrey was babbling excitedly, “I’ll have all their heads, I’ll—”

The dwarf slapped his flushed face so hard the crown flew from Joffrey’s head. Then he shoved him with both hands and knocked him sprawling. “You blind bloody *fool*.”

“They were traitors,” Joffrey squealed from the ground. “They called me names and attacked me!”

“*You set your dog on them!* What did you imagine they would do, bend the knee meekly while the Hound lopped off some limbs? You spoiled witless little boy, you’ve killed Clegane and gods know how many more, and yet you come through unscratched. *Damn you!*” And he kicked him. It felt so good he might have done more, but Ser Mandon Moore pulled him off as Joffrey howled, and then Bronn was there to take him in hand. Cersei knelt over her son, while Ser Balon Swann restrained Ser Lancel. Tyrion wrenched free of Bronn’s grip. “How many are still out there?” he shouted to no one and everyone.

“My daughter,” cried Lady Tanda. “Please, someone must go back for Lollys...”

“Ser Preston is not returned,” Ser Boros Blount reported, “nor Aron Santagar.”

“Nor Wet Nurse,” said Ser Horas Redwyne. That was the mocking name the other squires had hung on young Tyrek Lannister.

Tyrion glanced round the yard. “Where’s the Stark girl?”

For a moment no one answered. Finally Joffrey said, “She was riding by me. I don’t know where she went.”

Tyrion pressed blunt fingers into his throbbing temples. If Sansa Stark had come to harm, Jaime was as good as dead. “Ser Mandon, you were her shield.”

Ser Mandon Moore remained untroubled. “When they mobbed the Hound, I thought first of the king.”

“And rightly so,” Cersei put in. “Boros, Meryn, go back and find the girl.”

“And my daughter,” Lady Tanda sobbed. “Please, sers...”

Ser Boros did not look pleased at the prospect of leaving the safety of the castle. “Your Grace,” he told the queen, “the sight of our white cloaks might enrage the mob.”

Tyrian had stomached all he cared to. “The Others take your fucking cloaks! *Take them off* if you’re afraid to wear them, you bloody oaf... but *find me Sansa Stark* or I swear, I’ll have Shagga split that ugly head of yours in two to see if there’s anything inside but black pudding.”

Ser Boros went purple with rage. “You would call *me* ugly, *you?*” He started to raise the bloody sword still clutched in his mailed fist. Bronn shoved Tyrian unceremoniously behind him.

“*Stop it!*” Cersei snapped. “Boros, you’ll do as you’re bid, or we’ll find someone else to wear that cloak. Your oath—”

“There she is!” Joffrey shouted, pointing.

Sandor Clegane cantered briskly through the gates astride Sansa’s chestnut courser. The girl was seated behind, both arms tight around the Hound’s chest.

Tyrian called to her. “Are you hurt, Lady Sansa?”

Blood was trickling down Sansa’s brow from a deep gash on her scalp. “They... they were throwing things... rocks and filth, eggs... I tried to tell them, I had no bread to give them. A man tried to pull me from the saddle. The Hound killed him, I think... his arm...” Her eyes widened and she put a hand over her mouth. “He *cut off his arm.*”

Clegane lifted her to the ground. His white cloak was torn and stained, and blood seeped through a jagged tear in his left sleeve. “The little bird’s bleeding. Someone take her back to her cage and see to that cut.” Maester Frenken scurried forward to obey. “They did for Santagar,” the Hound continued. “Four men held him down and took turns bashing at his head with a cobblestone. I gutted one, not that it did Ser Aron much good.”

Lady Tanda approached him. “My daughter—”

“Never saw her.” The Hound glanced around the yard, scowling. “Where’s my horse? If anything’s happened to that horse, someone’s going to pay.”

“He was running with us for a time,” Tyrion said, “but I don’t know what became of him after that.”

“*Fire!*” a voice screamed down from atop the barbican. “My lords, there’s smoke in the city. Flea Bottom’s afire.”

Tyrion was inutterably weary, but there was no time for despair. “Bronn, take as many men as you need and see that the water wagons are not molested,” *Gods be good, the wildfire, if any blaze should reach that...* “We can lose all of Flea Bottom if we must, but on no account must the fire reach the Guildhall of the Alchemists, is that understood? Clegane, you’ll go with him.”

For half a heartbeat, Tyrion thought he glimpsed fear in the Hound’s dark eyes. *Fire*, he realized. *The Others take me, of course he hates fire, he’s tasted it too well.* The look was gone in an instant, replaced by Clegane’s familiar scowl. “I’ll go,” he said, “though not by *your* command. I need to find that horse.”

Tyrion turned to the three remaining knights of the Kingsguard. “Each of you will ride escort to a herald. Command the people to return to their homes. Any man found on the streets after the last peal of the evenfall bell will be killed.”

“Our place is beside the king,” Ser Meryn said, complacent.

Cersei reared up like a viper. “Your place is where my brother says it is,” she spit. “The Hand speaks with the king’s own voice, and disobedience is treason.”

Boros and Meryn exchanged a look. “Should we wear our cloaks, Your Grace?” Ser Boros asked.

“Go naked for all I care. It might remind the mob that you’re men. They’re like to have forgotten after seeing the way you behaved out there in the street.”

Tyrion let his sister rage. His head was throbbing. He thought he could smell smoke, though perhaps it was just the scent of his nerves fraying.

Two of the Stone Crows guarded the door of the Tower of the Hand. “Find me Timett son of Timett.”

“Stone Crows do not run squeaking after Burned Men,” one of the wildlings informed him haughtily.

For a moment Tyrion had forgotten who he was dealing with. “Then find me Shagga.”

“Shagga sleeps.”

It was an effort not to scream. “Wake. Him.”

“It is no easy thing to wake Shagga son of Dolf,” the man complained. “His wrath is fearsome.” He went off grumbling.

The clansman wandered in yawning and scratching. “Half the city is rioting, the other half is burning, and Shagga lies snoring,” Tyrion said.

“Shagga dislikes your muddy water here, so he must drink your weak ale and sour wine, and after his head hurts.”

“I have Shae in a manse near the Iron Gate. I want you to go to her and keep her safe, whatever may come.”

The huge man smiled, his teeth a yellow crevasse in the hairy wilderness of his beard. “Shagga will fetch her here.”

“Just see that no harm comes to her. Tell her I will come to her as soon as I may. This very night, perhaps, or on the morrow for a certainty.”

Yet by evenfall the city was still in turmoil, though Bronn reported that the fires were quenched and most of the roving mobs dispersed. Much as Tyrion yearned for the comfort of Shae’s arms, he realized he would go nowhere that night.

Ser Jacelyn Bywater delivered the butcher’s bill as he was supping on a cold capon and brown bread in the gloom of his solar. Dusk had faded to darkness by then, but when his servants came to light his candles and start a fire in the hearth, Tyrion had roared at them and sent them running. His mood was as black as the chamber, and Bywater said nothing to lighten it.

The list of the slain was topped by the High Septon, ripped apart as he squealed to his gods for mercy. *Starving men take a hard view of priests too fat to walk*, Tyrion reflected.

Ser Preston's corpse had been overlooked at first; the gold cloaks had been searching for a knight in white armor, and he had been stabbed and hacked so cruelly that he was red-brown from head to heel.

Ser Aron Santagar had been found in a gutter, his head a red pulp inside a crushed helm.

Lady Tanda's daughter had surrendered her maidenhood to half a hundred shouting men behind a tanner's shop. The gold cloaks found her wandering naked on Sowbelly Row.

Tyrek was still missing, as was the High Septon's crystal crown. Nine gold cloaks had been slain, two score wounded. No one had troubled to count how many of the mob had died.

"I want Tyrek found, alive or dead," Tyrion said curtly when Bywater was done. "He's no more than a boy. Son to my late uncle Tygett. His father was always kind to me."

"We'll find him. The septon's crown as well."

"The Others can bugger each other with the septon's crown, for all I care."

"When you named me to command the Watch, you told me you wanted plain truth, always."

"Somehow I have a feeling I am not going to like whatever you're about to say," Tyrion said gloomily.

"We held the city today, my lord, but I make no promises for the morrow. The kettle is close to boiling. So many thieves and murderers are abroad that no man's house is safe, the bloody flux is spreading in the stews along Pisswater Bend, there's no food to be had for copper nor silver. Where before you heard only mutterings from the gutter, now there's open talk of treason in guildhalls and markets."

"Do you need more men?"

“I do not trust half the men I have now. Slynt tripled the size of the Watch, but it takes more than a gold cloak to make a watchman. There are good men and loyal among the new recruits, but also more brutes, sots, cravens, and traitors than you’d care to know. They’re half-trained and undisciplined, and what loyalty they have is to their own skins. If it comes to battle, they’ll not hold, I fear.”

“I never expected them to,” said Tyrion. “Once our walls are breeched, we are lost, I’ve known that from the start.”

“My men are largely drawn from the smallfolk. They walk the same streets, drink in the same winesinks, spoon down their bowls of brown in the same pot-shops. Your eunuch must have told you, there is small love for the Lannisters in King’s Landing. Many still remember how your lord father sacked the city, when Aerys opened the gates to him. They whisper that the gods are punishing us for the sins of your House—for your brother’s murder of King Aerys, for the butchery of Rhaegar’s children, for the execution of Eddard Stark and the savagery of Joffrey’s justice. Some talk openly of how much better things were when Robert was king, and hint that times would be better again with Stannis on the throne. In pot-shops and winesinks and brothels, you hear these things—and in the barracks and guardhalls as well, I fear.”

“They hate my family, is that what you are telling me?”

“Aye... and will turn on them, if the chance comes.”

“Me as well?”

“Ask your eunuch.”

“I’m asking you.”

Bywater’s deep-set eyes met the dwarf’s mismatched ones, and did not blink. “You most of all, my lord.”

“*Most of all?*” The injustice was like to choke him. “It was Joffrey who told them to eat their dead, Joffrey who set his dog on them. How could they blame me?”

“His Grace is but a boy. In the streets, it is said that he has evil councillors. The queen has never been known as a friend to the commons,

nor is Lord Varys called the Spider out of love... but it is you they blame most. Your sister and the eunuch were here when times were better under King Robert, but you were not. They say that you've filled the city with swaggering sellswords and unwashed savages, brutes who take what they want and follow no laws but their own. They say you exiled Janos Slynt because you found him too bluff and honest for your liking. They say you threw wise and gentle Pycelle into the dungeons when he dared raise his voice against you. Some even claim that you mean to seize the Iron Throne for your own."

"Yes, and I am a monster besides, hideous and misshapen, never forget that." His hand coiled into a fist. "I've heard enough. We both have work to attend to. Leave me."

Perhaps my lord father was right to despise me all these years, if this is the best I can achieve, Tyrion thought when he was alone. He stared down at the remains of his supper, his belly roiling at the sight of the cold greasy capon. Disgusted, he pushed it away, shouted for Pod, and sent the boy running to summon Varys and Bronn. *My most trusted advisers are a eunuch and a sellsword, and my lady's a whore. What does that say of me?*

Bronn complained of the gloom when he arrived, and insisted on a fire in the hearth. It was blazing by the time Varys made his appearance.

"Where have you been?" Tyrion demanded.

"About the king's business, my sweet lord."

"Ah, yes, the *king*," Tyrion muttered. "My nephew is not fit to sit a privy, let alone the Iron Throne."

Varys shrugged. "An apprentice must be taught his trade."

"Half the 'prentices on Reeking Lane could rule better than this king of yours." Bronn seated himself across the table and pulled a wing off the capon.

Tyrion had made a practice of ignoring the sellsword's frequent insolences, but tonight he found it galling. "I don't recall giving you leave to finish my supper."

“You didn’t look to be eating it,” Bronn said through a mouthful of meat. “City’s starving, it’s a crime to waste food. You have any wine?”

Next he’ll want me to pour it for him, Tyrion thought darkly. “You go too far,” he warned.

“And you never go far enough.” Bronn tossed the wingbone to the rushes. “Ever think how easy life would be if the other one had been born first?” He thrust his fingers inside the capon and tore off a handful of breast. “The weepy one, Tommen. Seems like he’d do whatever he was told, as a good king should.”

A chill crept down Tyrion’s spine as he realized what the sellsword was hinting at. *If Tommen was king...*

There was only one way Tommen would become king. No, he could not even think it. Joffrey was his own blood, and Jaime’s son as much as Cersei’s. “I could have your head off for saying that,” he told Bronn, but the sellsword only laughed.

“Friends,” said Varys, “quarreling will not serve us. I beg you both, take heart.”

“Whose?” asked Tyrion sourly. He could think of several tempting choices.