

TYRION

By the time they reached Volantis, the sky was purple to the west and black to the east, and the stars were coming out. *The same stars as in Westeros*, Tyrion Lannister reflected.

He might have taken some comfort in that if he had not been trussed up like a goose and lashed to a saddle. He had given up squirming. The knots that bound him were too tight. Instead he'd gone as limp as a sack of meal. *Saving my strength*, he told himself, though for what he could not have said.

Volantis closed its gates at dark, and the guardsmen on its northern gate were grumbling impatiently at the stragglers. They joined the queue behind a wagon laden with limes and oranges. The guards motioned the wagon through with their torches but took a harder look at the big Andal on his warhorse, with his longsword and his mail. A captain was summoned. Whilst he and the knight exchanged some words in Volantene, one of the guardsmen pulled off his clawed gauntlet and gave Tyrion's head a rub. "I'm full of good fortune," the dwarf told him. "Cut me loose, friend, and I'll see you're well rewarded."

His captor overheard. "Save your lies for those who speak your tongue, Imp," he said, when the Volantenes waved them on.

They were moving again, through the gate and beneath the city's massive walls. "*You* speak my tongue. Can I sway you with promises, or are you determined to buy a lordship with my head?"

"I *was* a lord, by right of birth. I want no hollow titles."

"That's all you're like to get from my sweet sister."

"And here I'd heard a Lannister always pays his debts."

"Oh, every penny ... but never a groat more, my lord. You'll get the meal you bargained for, but it won't be sauced with gratitude, and in the end it will not nourish you."

“Might be all I want is to see you pay for crimes. The kinslayer is accursed in the eyes of gods and men.”

“The gods are blind. And men see only what they wish.”

“I see you plain enough, Imp.” Something dark had crept into the knight’s tone. “I have done things I am not proud of, things that brought shame onto my House and my father’s name ... but to kill your own sire? How could any man do that?”

“Give me a crossbow and pull down your breeches, and I’ll show you.”
Gladly.

“You think this is a jape?”

“I think life is a jape. Yours, mine, everyone’s.”

Inside the city walls, they rode past guildhalls, markets, and bathhouses. Fountains splashed and sang in the centers of wide squares, where men sat at stone tables, moving *cyvasse* pieces and sipping wine from glass flutes as slaves lit ornate lanterns to hold the dark at bay. Palms and cedars grew along the cobbled road, and monuments stood at every junction. Many of the statues lacked heads, the dwarf noted, yet even headless they still managed to look imposing in the purple dusk.

As the warhorse plodded south along the river, the shops grew smaller and meaner, the trees along the street became a row of stumps. Cobblestones gave way to devilgrass beneath their horse’s hooves, then to soft wet mud the color of a baby’s nightsoil. The little bridges that spanned the small streams that fed the Rhoyme creaked alarmingly beneath their weight. Where a fort had once overlooked the river now stood a broken gate, gaping open like an old man’s toothless mouth. Goats could be glimpsed peering over the parapets.

Old Volantis, first daughter of Valyria, the dwarf mused. Proud Volantis, queen of the Rhoyme and mistress of the Summer Sea, home to noble lords and lovely ladies of the most ancient blood. Never mind the packs of naked children that roamed the alleys screaming in shrill voices, or the bravos

standing in the doors of wineshops fingering their sword hilts, or the slaves with their bent backs and tattooed faces who scurried everywhere like cockroaches. *Mighty Volantis, grandest and most populous of the Nine Free Cities.* Ancient wars had depopulated much of the city, however, and large areas of Volantis had begun to sink back into the mud on which it stood. *Beautiful Volantis, city of fountains and flowers.* But half the fountains were dry, half the pools cracked and stagnant. Flowering vines sent up creepers from every crack in the wall or pavement, and young trees had taken root in the walls of abandoned shops and roofless temples.

And then there was the smell. It hung in the hot, humid air, rich, rank, pervasive. *There's fish in it, and flowers, and some elephant dung as well. Something sweet and something earthy and something dead and rotten.* "This city smells like an old whore," Tyrion announced. "Like some sagging slattern who has drenched her privy parts in perfume to drown the stench between her legs. Not that I am complaining. With whores, the young ones smell much better, but the old ones know more tricks."

"You would know more of that than I do."

"Ah, of course. That brothel where we met, did you take it for a sept? Was that your virgin sister squirming in your lap?"

That made him scowl. "Give that tongue of yours a rest unless you'd rather I tied it in a knot."

Tyrion swallowed his retort. His lip was still fat and swollen from the last time he had pushed the big knight too far. *Hard hands and no sense of humor makes for a bad marriage.* That much he'd learned on the road from Selhorys. His thoughts went to his boot, to the mushrooms in the toe. His captor had not searched him quite as thoroughly as he might have. *There is always that escape. Cersei will not have me alive, at least.*

Farther south, signs of prosperity began to reappear. Abandoned buildings were seen less often, the naked children vanished, the bravos in the doorways seemed more sumptuously dressed. A few of the inns they passed actually looked like places where a man might sleep without fear of having his throat slit. Lanterns swung from iron stanchions along the river road,

swaying when the wind blew. The streets grew broader, the buildings more imposing. Some were topped with great domes of colored glass. In the gathering dusk, with fires lit beneath them, the domes glowed blue and red and green and purple.

Even so, there was something in the air that made Tyrion uneasy. West of the Rhoyme, he knew, the wharves of Volantis teemed with sailors, slaves, and traders, and the wineshops, inns, and brothels all catered to them. East of the river, strangers from across the seas were seen less seldom. *We are not wanted here*, the dwarf realized.

The first time they passed an elephant, Tyrion could not help but stare. There had been an elephant in the menagerie at Lannisport when he had been a boy, but she had died when he was seven ... and this great grey behemoth looked to be twice her size.

Farther on, they fell in behind a smaller elephant, white as old bone and pulling an ornate cart. “Is an oxcart an oxcart without an ox?” Tyrion asked his captor. When that sally got no response, he lapsed back into silence, contemplating the rolling rump of the white dwarf elephant ahead of them.

Volantis was overrun with white dwarf elephants. As they drew closer to the Black Wall and the crowded districts near the Long Bridge, they saw a dozen of them. Big grey elephants were not uncommon either—huge beasts with castles on their backs. And in the half-light of evening the dung carts had come out, attended by half-naked slaves whose task it was to shovel up the steaming piles left by elephants both great and small. Swarms of flies followed the carts, so the dung slaves had flies tattooed upon their cheeks, to mark them for what they were. *There’s a trade for my sweet sister*, Tyrion mused. *She’d look so pretty with a little shovel and flies tattooed on those sweet pink cheeks.*

By then they had slowed to a crawl. The river road was thick with traffic, almost all of it flowing south. The knight went with it, a log caught in a current. Tyrion eyed the passing throngs. Nine men of every ten bore slave marks on their cheeks. “So many slaves ... where are they all going?”

“The red priests light their nightfires at sunset. The High Priest will be speaking. I would avoid it if I could, but to reach the Long Bridge we must pass the red temple.”

Three blocks later the street opened up before them onto a huge torchlit plaza, and there it stood. *Seven save me, that's got to be three times the size of the Great Sept of Baelor.* An enormity of pillars, steps, buttresses, bridges, domes, and towers flowing into one another as if they had all been chiseled from one colossal rock, the Temple of the Lord of Light loomed like Aegon's High Hill. A hundred hues of red, yellow, gold, and orange met and melded in the temple walls, dissolving one into the other like clouds at sunset. Its slender towers twisted ever upward, frozen flames dancing as they reached for the sky. *Fire turned to stone.* Huge nightfires burned beside the temple steps, and between them the High Priest had begun to speak.

Benerro. The priest stood atop a red stone pillar, joined by a slender stone bridge to a lofty terrace where the lesser priests and acolytes stood. The acolytes were clad in robes of pale yellow and bright orange, priests and priestesses in red.

The great plaza before them was packed almost solid. Many and more of the worshipers were wearing some scrap of red cloth pinned to their sleeves or tied around their brows. Every eye was on the high priest, save theirs. “Make way,” the knight growled as his horse pushed through the throng. “Clear a path.” The Volantenes gave way resentfully, with mutters and angry looks.

Benerro's high voice carried well. Tall and thin, he had a drawn face and skin white as milk. Flames had been tattooed across his cheeks and chin and shaven head to make a bright red mask that crackled about his eyes and coiled down and around his lipless mouth. “Is that a slave tattoo?” asked Tyrion.

The knight nodded. “The red temple buys them as children and makes them priests or temple prostitutes or warriors. Look there.” He pointed at the steps, where a line of men in ornate armor and orange cloaks stood before

the temple's doors, claspings spears with points like writhing flames. "The Fiery Hand. The Lord of Light's sacred soldiers, defenders of the temple."

Fire knights. "And how many fingers does this hand have, pray?"

"One thousand. Never more, and never less. A new flame is kindled for every one that gutters out."

Benerro jabbed a finger at the moon, made a fist, spread his hands wide. When his voice rose in a crescendo, flames leapt from his fingers with a sudden *whoosh* and made the crowd gasp. The priest could trace fiery letters in the air as well. *Valyrian glyphs.* Tyrion recognized perhaps two in ten; one was *Doom*, the other *Darkness*.

Shouts erupted from the crowd. Women were weeping and men were shaking their fists. *I have a bad feeling about this.* The dwarf was reminded of the day Myrcella sailed for Dorne and the riot that boiled up as they made their way back to the Red Keep.

Haldon Halfmaester had spoken of using the red priest to Young Griff's advantage, Tyrion recalled. Now that he had seen and heard the man himself, that struck him as a very bad idea. He hoped that Griff had better sense. *Some allies are more dangerous than enemies. But Lord Connington will need to puzzle that one out for himself. I am like to be a head on a spike.*

The priest was pointing at the Black Wall behind the temple, gesturing up at its parapets, where a handful of armored guardsmen stood gazing down. "What is he saying?" Tyrion asked the knight.

"That Daenerys stands in peril. The dark eye has fallen upon her, and the minions of night are plotting her destruction, praying to their false gods in temples of deceit ... conspiring at betrayal with godless outlanders ..."

The hairs on the back of Tyrion's neck began to prickle. *Prince Aegon will find no friend here.* The red priest spoke of ancient prophecy, a prophecy that foretold the coming of a hero to deliver the world from darkness. *One hero. Not two. Daenerys has dragons, Aegon does not.* The dwarf did not

need to be a prophet himself to foresee how Benerro and his followers might react to a second Targaryen. *Griff will see that too, surely*, he thought, surprised to find how much he cared.

The knight had forced their way through most of the press at the back of the plaza, ignoring the curses that were flung at them as they passed. One man stepped in front of them, but his captor gripped the hilt of his longsword and drew it just far enough to show a foot of naked steel. The man melted away, and all at once an alley opened up before them. The knight urged his mount to a trot, and they left the crowd behind them. For a while Tyrion could still hear Benerro's voice growing fainter at their back and the roars his words provoked, sudden as thunder.

They came upon a stable. The knight dismounted, then hammered on the door until a haggard slave with a horsehead on his cheek came running. The dwarf was pulled down roughly from the saddle and lashed to a post whilst his captor woke the stable's owner and haggled with him over the price of his horse and saddle. *Cheaper to sell a horse than to ship one half across the world*. Tyrion sensed a ship in his immediate future. Perhaps he was a prophet after all.

When the dickering was done, the knight slung his weapons, shield, and saddlebag over his shoulder and asked for directions to the nearest smithy. That proved shuttered too, but opened quick enough at the knight's shout. The smith gave Tyrion a squint, then nodded and accepted a fistful of coins. "Come here," the knight told his prisoner. He drew his dagger and slit Tyrion's bonds apart. "My thanks," said the dwarf as he rubbed his wrists, but the knight only laughed and said, "Save your gratitude for someone who deserves it, Imp. You will not like this next bit."

He was not wrong.

The manacles were black iron, thick and heavy, each weighing a good two pounds, if the dwarf was any judge. The chains added even more weight. "I must be more fearsome than I knew," Tyrion confessed as the last links were hammered closed. Each blow sent a shock up his arm almost to the shoulder. "Or were you afraid that I would dash away on these stunted little legs of mine?"

The ironsmith did not so much as look up from his work, but the knight chuckled darkly. "It's your mouth that concerns me, not your legs. In fetters, you're a slave. No one will listen to a word you say, not even those who speak the tongue of Westeros."

"There's no need for this," Tyrion protested. "I will be a good little prisoner, I will, I will."

"Prove it, then, and shut your mouth."

So he bowed his head and bit his tongue as the chains were fixed, wrist to wrist, wrist to ankle, ankle to ankle. *These bloody things weigh more than I do.* Still, at least he drew breath. His captor could just as easily have cut his head off. That was all Cersei required, after all. Not striking it off straightaway had been his captor's first mistake. *There is half a world between Volantis and King's Landing, and much and more can happen along the way, ser.*

The rest of the way they went by foot, Tyrion clanking and clattering as he struggled to keep up with his captor's long, impatient strides. Whenever he threatened to fall behind, the knight would seize his fetters and yank them roughly, sending the dwarf stumbling and hopping along beside him. *It could be worse. He could be urging me along with a whip.*

Volantis straddled one mouth of the Rhoyme where the river kissed the sea, its two halves joined by the Long Bridge. The oldest, richest part of the city was east of the river, but sellswords, barbarians, and other uncouth outlanders were not welcome there, so they must needs cross over to the west.

The gateway to the Long Bridge was a black stone arch carved with sphinxes, manticores, dragons, and creatures stranger still. Beyond the arch stretched the great span that the Valyrians had built at the height of their glory, its fused stone roadway supported by massive piers. The road was just wide enough for two carts to pass abreast, so whenever a wagon headed west passed one going east, both had to slow to a crawl.

It was well they were afoot. A third of the way out, a wagon laden with melons had gotten its wheels tangled with one piled high with silken carpets and brought all wheeled traffic to a halt. Much of the foot traffic had stopped as well, to watch the drivers curse and scream at one another, but the knight grabbed hold of Tyrion's chain and bulled a path through the throng for both of them. In the middle of the press, a boy tried to reach into his purse, but a hard elbow put an end to that and spread the thief's bloody nose across half his face.

Buildings rose to either side of them: shops and temples, taverns and inns, *cyvasse* parlors and brothels. Most were three or four stories tall, each floor overhanging the one beneath it. Their top floors almost kissed. Crossing the bridge felt like passing through a torchlit tunnel. Along the span were shops and stalls of every sort; weavers and lacemakers displayed their wares cheek by jowl with glassblowers, candlemakers, and fishwives selling eels and oysters. Each goldsmith had a guard at his door, and every spicer had two, for their goods were twice as valuable. Here and there, between the shops, a traveler might catch a glimpse of the river he was crossing. To the north the Rhoyme was a broad black ribbon bright with stars, five times as wide as the Blackwater Rush at King's Landing. South of the bridge the river opened up to embrace the briny sea.

At the bridge's center span, the severed hands of thieves and cutpurses hung like strings of onions from iron stanchions along the roadway. Three heads were on display as well—two men and a woman, their crimes scrawled on tablets underneath them. A pair of spearmen attended them, clad in polished helms and shirts of silver mail. Across their cheeks were tiger stripes as green as jade. From time to time the guards waved their spears to chase away the kestrels, gulls, and carrion crows paying court to the deceased. The birds returned to the heads within moments.

“What did they do?” Tyrion inquired innocently.

The knight glanced at the inscriptions. “The woman was a slave who raised her hand to her mistress. The older man was accused of fomenting rebellion and spying for the dragon queen.”

“And the young one?”

“Killed his father.”

Tyrion gave the rotting head a second look. *Why, it almost looks as if those lips are smiling.*

Farther on, the knight paused briefly to consider a jeweled tiara displayed upon a bed of purple velvet. He passed that by, but a few steps on he stopped again to haggle over a pair of gloves at a leatherworker’s stall. Tyrion was grateful for the respites. The headlong pace had left him puffing, and his wrists were chafed raw from the manacles.

From the far end of the Long Bridge, it was only a short walk through the teeming waterfront districts of the west bank, down torchlit streets crowded with sailors, slaves, and drunken merrymakers. Once an elephant lumbered past with a dozen half-naked slave girls waving from the castle on its back, teasing passersby with glimpses of their breasts and crying, “Malaquo, Malaquo.” They made such an entrancing sight that Tyrion almost waddled right into the steaming pile of dung the elephant had left to mark its passage. He was saved at the last instant when the knight snatched him aside, yanking on his chain so hard it made him reel and stumble.

“How much farther?” the dwarf asked. “Just there. Fishmonger’s Square.”

Their destination proved to be the Merchant’s House, a four-story monstrosity that squatted amongst the warehouses, brothels, and taverns of the waterside like some enormous fat man surrounded by children. Its common room was larger than the great halls of half the castles in Westeros, a dim-lit maze of a place with a hundred private alcoves and hidden nooks whose blackened beams and cracked ceilings echoed to the din of sailors, traders, captains, money changers, shippers, and slavers, lying, cursing, and cheating each other in half a hundred different tongues.

Tyrion approved the choice of hostelry. Soon or late the *Shy Maid* must reach Volantis. This was the city’s biggest inn, first choice for shippers, captains, and merchantmen. A lot of business was done in that cavernous warren of a common room. He knew enough of Volantis to know that. Let Griff turn up here with Duck and Haldon, and he would be free again soon enough.

Meanwhile, he would be patient. His chance would come.

The rooms upstairs proved rather less than grand, however, particularly the cheap ones up on the fourth floor. Wedged into a corner of the building beneath a sloping roof, the bedchamber his captor had engaged featured a low ceiling, a sagging feather bed with an unpleasant odor, and a slanting wood-plank floor that reminded Tyrion of his sojourn at the Eyrie. *At least this room has walls.* It had windows too; those were its chief amenity, along with the iron ring set in the wall, so useful for chaining up one's slaves. His captor paused only long enough to light a tallow candle before securing Tyrion's chains to the ring.

"Must you?" the dwarf protested, rattling feebly. "Where am I going to go, out the window?"

"You might."

"We are four floors up, and I cannot fly."

"You can fall. I want you alive."

Aye, but why? Cersei is not like to care. Tyrion rattled his chains. "I know who you are, ser." It had not been hard to puzzle out. The bear on his surcoat, the arms on his shield, the lost lordship he had mentioned. "I know *what* you are. And if you know who I am, you also know that I was the King's Hand and sat in council with the Spider. Would it interest you to know that it was the eunuch who dispatched me on this journey?" *Him and Jaime, but I'll leave my brother out of it.* "I am as much his creature as you are. We ought not be at odds."

That did not please the knight. "I took the Spider's coin, I'll not deny it, but I was never his creature. And my loyalties lie elsewhere now."

"With Cersei? More fool you. All my sister requires is my head, and you have a fine sharp sword. Why not end this farce now and spare us both?"

The knight laughed. "Is this some dwarf's trick? Beg for death in hopes I'll let you live?" He went to the door. "I'll bring you something from the

kitchens.”

“How kind of you. I’ll wait here.”

“I know you will.” Yet when the knight left, he locked the door behind him with a heavy iron key. The Merchant’s House was famous for its locks. *As secure as a gaol*, the dwarf thought bitterly, *but at least there are those windows*.

Tyrion knew that the chances of his escaping his chains were little and less, but even so, he felt obliged to try. His efforts to slip a hand through the manacle served only to scrap off more skin and leave his wrist slick with blood, and all his tugging or twisting could not pull the iron ring from the wall. *Bugger this*, he thought, slumping back as far as his chains would allow. His legs had begun to cramp. This was going to be a hellishly uncomfortable night. *The first of many, I do not doubt*.

The room was stifling, so the knight had opened the shutters to let in a cross breeze. Cramped into a corner of the building under the eaves, the chamber was fortunate in having two windows. One looked toward the Long Bridge and the black-walled heart of Old Volantis across the river. The other opened on the square below. Fishermonger’s Square, Mormont called it. As tight as the chains were, Tyrion found he could see out the latter by leaning sideways and letting the iron ring support his weight. *Not as long a fall as the one from Lysa Arryn’s sky cells, but it would leave me just as dead. Perhaps if I were drunk ...*

Even at this hour the square was crowded, with sailors roistering, whores prowling for custom, and merchants going about their business. A red priestess scurried past, attended by a dozen acolytes with torches, their robes whisking about their ankles. Elsewhere a pair of *cyvasse* players waged war outside a tavern. A slave stood beside their table, holding a lantern over the board. Tyrion could hear a woman singing. The words were strange, the tune was soft and sad. *If I knew what she was singing, I might cry*. Closer to hand, a crowd was gathering around a pair of jugglers throwing flaming torches at each other.

His captor returned shortly, carrying two tankards and a roasted duck. He kicked the door shut, ripped the duck in two, and tossed half of it to Tyrion. He would have snatched it from the air, but his chains brought him up short when he tried to lift his arms. Instead the bird struck his temple and slid hot and greasy down his face, and he had to hunker down and stretch for it with fetters clanking. He got it on the third try and tore into it happily with his teeth. “Some ale to wash this down?”

Mormont handed him a tankard. “Most of Volantis is getting drunk, why not you?”

The ale was sweet as well. It tasted of fruit. Tyrion drank a healthy swallow and belched happily. The tankard was pewter, very heavy. *Empty it and fling it at his head*, he thought. *If I am lucky, it might crack his skull. If I’m very lucky, it will miss, and he’ll beat me to death with his fists.* He took another gulp. “Is this some holy day?”

“Third day of their elections. They last for ten. Ten days of madness. Torchlight marches, speeches, mummers and minstrels and dancers, bravos fighting death duels for the honor of their candidates, elephants with the names of would-be triarchs painted on their sides. Those jugglers are performing for Methyso.”

“Remind me to vote for someone else.” Tyrion licked grease from his fingers. Below, the crowd was flinging coins at the jugglers. “Do all these would-be triarchs provide mummer shows?”

“They do whatever they think will win them votes,” said Mormont. “Food, drink, spectacle ... Alios has sent a hundred pretty slave girls out into the streets to lie with voters.”

“I’m for him,” Tyrion decided. “Bring me a slave girl.”

“They’re for freeborn Volantenes with enough property to vote. Precious few voters west of the river.”

“And this goes on for ten days?” Tyrion laughed. “I might enjoy that, though three kings is two too many. I am trying to imagine ruling the Seven

Kingdoms with my sweet sister and brave brother beside me. One of us would kill the other two inside a year. I am surprised these triarchs don't do the same."

"A few have tried. Might be the Volantenes are the clever ones and us Westerosi the fools. Volantis has known her share of follies, but she's never suffered a boy triarch. Whenever a madman's been elected, his colleagues restrain him until his year has run its course. Think of the dead who might still live if Mad Aerys only had two fellow kings to share the rule."

Instead he had my father, Tyrion thought. "Some in the Free Cities think that we're all savages on our side of the narrow sea," the knight went on. "The ones who don't think that we're children, crying out for a father's strong hand."

"Or a mother's?" *Cersei will love that. Especially when he presents her with my head.* "You seem to know this city well."

"I spent the best part of a year here." The knight sloshed the dregs at the bottom of his tankard. "When Stark drove me into exile, I fled to Lys with my second wife. Braavos would have suited me better, but Lynesse wanted someplace warm. Instead of serving the Braavosi I fought them on the Rhoyme, but for every silver I earned my wife spent ten. By the time I got back to Lys, she had taken a lover, who told me cheerfully that I would be enslaved for debt unless I gave her up and left the city. That was how I came to Volantis ... one step ahead of slavery, owning nothing but my sword and the clothes upon my back."

"And now you want to run home."

The knight drained the last of his ale. "On the morrow I'll find us a ship. The bed is mine. You can have whatever piece of floor your chains will let you reach. Sleep if you can. If not, count your crimes. That should see you through till the morning."

You have your crimes to answer for, Jorah Mormont, the dwarf thought, but it seemed wiser to keep that thought to himself.

Ser Jorah hung his sword belt on a bedpost, kicked off his boots, pulled his chain mail over his head, and stripped out of his wool and leather and sweat-stained undertunic to reveal a scarred, brawny torso covered with dark hair. *If I could skin him, I could sell that pelt for a fur cloak*, Tyrion thought as Mormont tumbled into the slightly smelly comfort of his sagging feather bed.

In no time at all the knight was snoring, leaving his prize alone with his chains. With both windows open wide, the light of the waning moon spilled across the bedchamber. Sounds drifted up from the square below: snatches of drunken song, the yowling of a cat in heat, the far-off ring of steel on steel. *Someone's about to die*, thought Tyrion.

His wrist was throbbing where he'd torn the skin, and his fetters made it impossible for him to sit, let alone stretch out. The best he could do was twist sideways to lean against the wall, and before long he began to lose all feeling in his hands. When he moved to relieve the strain, sensation came flooding back as pain. He had to grind his teeth to keep from screaming. He wondered how much his father had hurt when the quarrel punched through his groin, what Shae had felt as he twisted the chain around her lying throat, what Tysha had been feeling as they raped her. His sufferings were nothing compared to their own, but that did not make him hurt any less. *Just make it stop*.

Ser Jorah had rolled onto one side, so all that Tyrion could see of him was a broad, hairy, muscular back. *Even if I could slip these chains, I'd need to climb over him to reach his sword belt. Perhaps if I could ease the dagger loose ...* Or else he could try for the key, unlock the door, creep down the stairs and through the common room ... *and go where? I have no friends, no coin, I do not even speak the local tongue*.

Exhaustion finally overwhelmed his pains, and Tyrion drifted off into a fitful sleep. But every time another cramp took root inside his calf and twisted, the dwarf would cry out in his sleep, trembling in his chains. He woke with every muscle aching, to find morning streaming through the windows bright and golden as the lion of Lannister. Below he could hear the cries of fishmongers and the rumble of iron-rimmed wheels on cobblestones.

Jorah Mormont was standing over him. “If I take you off the ring, will you do as you’re told?”

“Will it involve dancing? I might find dancing difficult. I cannot feel my legs. They may have fallen off. Elsewise, I am your creature. On my honor as a Lannister.”

“The Lannisters have no honor.” Ser Jorah loosed his chains anyway. Tyrion took two wobbly steps and fell. The blood rushing back into his hands brought tears to his eyes. He bit his lip and said, “Wherever we’re going, you will need to roll me there.”

Instead the big knight carried him, hoisting him by the chain between his wrists.

The common room of the Merchant’s House was a dim labyrinth of alcoves and grottoes built around a central courtyard where a trellis of flowering vines threw intricate patterns across the flagstone floor and green and purple moss grew between the stones. Slave girls scurried through light and shadow, bearing flagons of ale and wine and some iced green drink that smelled of mint. One table in twenty was occupied at this hour of the morning.

One of those was occupied by a dwarf. Clean-shaved and pink-cheeked, with a mop of chestnut hair, a heavy brow, and a squashed nose, he perched on a high stool with a wooden spoon in hand, contemplating a bowl of purplish gruel with red-rimmed eyes. *Ugly little bastard*, Tyrion thought.

The other dwarf felt his stare. When he raised his head and saw Tyrion, the spoon slipped from his hand.

“He saw me,” Tyrion warned Mormont. “What of it?”

“He *knows* me. Who I am.”

“Should I stuff you in a sack, so no one will see you?” The knight touched the hilt of his longsword. “If he means to try and take you, he is welcome to try.”

Welcome to die, you mean, thought Tyrion. What threat could he pose to a big man like you? He is only a dwarf.

Ser Jorah claimed a table in a quiet corner and ordered food and drink. They broke their fast with warm soft flatbread, pink fish roe, honey sausage, and fried locusts, washed down with a bittersweet black ale. Tyrion ate like a man half-starved. "You have a healthy appetite this morning," the knight observed.

"I've heard the food in hell is wretched." Tyrion glanced at the door, where a man had just come in: tall and stooped, his pointed beard dyed a splotchy purple. *Some Tyroshi trader.* A gust of sound came with him from outside; the cries of gulls, a woman's laughter, the voices of the fishmongers. For half a heartbeat he thought he glimpsed Illyrio Mopatis, but it was only one of those white dwarf elephants passing the front door.

Mormont spread some fish roe across a slice of flatbread and took a bite. "Are you expecting someone?"

Tyrion shrugged. "You never know who the wind might blow in. My one true love, my father's ghost, a duck." He popped a locust into his mouth and crunched it. "Not bad. For a bug."

"Last night the talk here was all of Westeros. Some exiled lord has hired the Golden Company to win back his lands for him. Half the captains in Volantis are racing upriver to Volon Therys to offer him their ships."

Tyrion had just swallowed another locust. He almost choked on it. *Is he mocking me? How much could he know of Griff and Aegon?* "Bugger," he said. "I meant to hire the Golden Company myself, to win me Casterly Rock." *Could this be some ploy of Griff's, false reports deliberately spread? Unless ...* Could the pretty princeling have swallowed the bait? Turned them west instead of east, abandoning his hopes of wedding Queen Daenerys? *Abandoning the dragons ... would Griff allow that?* "I'll gladly hire you as well, ser. My father's seat is mine by rights. Swear me your sword, and once I win it back I'll drown you in gold."

“I saw a man drowned in gold once. It was not a pretty sight. If you ever get my sword, it will be through your bowels.”

“A sure cure for constipation,” said Tyrion. “Just ask my father.” He reached for his tankard and took a slow swallow, to help conceal whatever might be showing on his face. It had to be a stratagem, designed to lull Volantene suspicions. *Get the men aboard with this false pretext and seize the ships when the fleet is out to sea. Is that Griff’s plan?* It might work. The Golden Company was ten thousand strong, seasoned and disciplined. *None of them seamen, though. Griff will need to keep a sword at every throat, and should they come on Slaver’s Bay and need to fight ...*

The serving girl returned. “The widow will see you next, noble ser. Have you brought a gift for her?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Ser Jorah slipped a coin into the girl’s palm and sent her on her way.

Tyrion frowned. “Whose widow is this?”

“The widow of the waterfront. East of the Rhoyme they still call her Vogarro’s whore, though never to her face.”

The dwarf was not enlightened. “And Vogarro was ... ?”

“An elephant, seven times a triarch, very rich, a power on the docks. Whilst other men built the ships and sailed them, he built piers and storehouses, brokered cargoes, changed money, insured shipowners against the hazards of the sea. He dealt in slaves as well. When he grew besotted with one of them, a bedslave trained at Yunkai in the way of seven sighs, it was a great scandal ... and a greater scandal when he freed her and took her for his wife. After he died, she carried on his ventures. No freedman may dwell within the Black Wall, so she was compelled to sell Vogarro’s manse. She took up residence at the Merchant’s House. That was thirty-two years ago, and she remains here to this day. That’s her behind you, back by the courtyard, holding court at her customary table. No, don’t look. There’s someone with her now. When he’s done, it will be our turn.”

“And this old harridan will help you how?”

Ser Jorah stood. “Watch and see. He’s leaving.”

Tyrion hopped down off his chair with a rattle of iron. *This should be enlightening.*

There was something vulpine about the way the woman sat in her corner by the courtyard, something reptilian about her eyes. Her white hair was so thin that the pink of her scalp showed through. Under one eye she still bore faint scars where a knife had cut away her tears. The remnants of her morning meal littered the table—sardine heads, olive pits, chunks of flatbread. Tyrion did not fail to note how well chosen her “customary table” was; solid stone at her back, a leafy alcove to one side for entrances and exits, a perfect view of the inn’s front door, yet so steeped in shadow that she herself was nigh invisible.

The sight of him made the old woman smile. “A dwarf,” she purred, in a voice as sinister as it was soft. She spoke the Common Tongue with only a trace of accent. “Volantis has been overrun with dwarfs of late, it seems. Does this one do tricks?”

Yes, Tyrion wanted to say. *Give me a crossbow, and I’ll show you my favorite.* “No,” Ser Jorah answered.

“A pity. I once had a monkey who could perform all sorts of clever tricks. Your dwarf reminds me of him. Is he a gift?”

“No. I brought you these.” Ser Jorah produced his pair of gloves, and slapped them down on the table beside the other gifts the widow had received this morning: a silver goblet, an ornate fan carved of jade leaves so thin they were translucent, and an ancient bronze dagger marked with runes. Beside such treasures the gloves looked cheap and tawdry.

“Gloves for my poor old wrinkled hands. How nice.” The widow made no move to touch them.

“I bought them on the Long Bridge.”

“A man can buy most anything on the Long Bridge. Gloves, slaves, monkeys.” The years had bent her spine and put a crone’s hump upon her back, but the widow’s eyes were bright and black. “Now tell this old widow how she may be of service to you.”

“We need swift passage to Meereen.”

One word. Tyrion Lannister’s world turned upside down.

One word. *Meereen*. Or had he misheard?

One word. *Meereen, he said Meereen, he’s taking me to Meereen*. Meereen meant life. Or hope for life, at least.

“Why come to me?” the widow said. “I own no ships.”

“You have many captains in your debt.”

Deliver me to the queen, he says. Aye, but which queen? He isn’t selling me to Cersei. He’s giving me to Daenerys Targaryen. That’s why he hasn’t hacked my head off. We’re going east, and Griff and his prince are going west, the bloody fools.

Oh, it was all too much. *Plots within plots, but all roads lead down the dragon’s gullet*. A guffaw burst from his lips, and suddenly Tyrion could not stop laughing.

“Your dwarf is having a fit,” the widow observed. “My dwarf will be quiet, or I’ll see him gagged.”

Tyrion covered his mouth with his hands. *Meereen!*

The widow of the waterfront decided to ignore him. “Shall we have a drink?” she asked. Dust motes floated in the air as a serving girl filled two green glass cups for Ser Jorah and the widow. Tyrion’s throat was dry, but no cup was poured for him. The widow took a sip, rolled the wine round her mouth, swallowed. “All the other exiles are sailing west, or so these old ears have heard. And all those captains in my debt are falling over one another to take them there and leach a little gold from the coffers of the

Golden Company. Our noble triarchs have pledged a dozen warships to the cause, to see the fleet safely as far as the Stepstones. Even old Doniphos has given his assent. Such a glorious adventure. And yet you would go the other way, ser.”

“My business is in the east.”

“And what business is that, I wonder? Not slaves, the silver queen has put an end to that. She has closed the fighting pits as well, so it cannot be a taste for blood. What else could Meereen offer to a Westerosi knight? Bricks? Olives? *Dragons*? Ah, there it is.” The old woman’s smile turned feral. “I have heard it said that the silver queen feeds them with the flesh of infants while she herself bathes in the blood of virgin girls and takes a different lover every night.”

Ser Jorah’s mouth had hardened. “The Yunkai’i are pouring poison in your ears. My lady should not believe such filth.”

“I am no lady, but even Vagarro’s whore knows the taste of falsehood. This much is true, though ... the dragon queen has enemies ... Yunkai, New Ghis, Tolos, Qarth ... aye, and Volantis, soon enough. You would travel to Meereen? Just wait a while, ser. Swords will be wanted soon enough, when the warships bend their oars eastward to bring down the silver queen. Tigers love to bare their claws, and even elephants will kill if threatened. Malaquo hungers for a taste of glory, and Nyessos owes much of his wealth to the slave trade. Let Alios or Parquello or Belicho gain the triarchy, and the fleets will sail.”

Ser Jorah scowled. “If Doniphos is returned ...”

“Vagarro will be returned first, and my sweet lord has been dead these thirty years.”

Behind them, some sailor was bellowing loudly. “They call this ale? *Fuck*. A monkey could piss better ale.”

“And you would drink it,” another voice replied.

Tyrion twisted around for a look, hoping against hope that it was Duck and Haldon he was hearing. Instead he saw two strangers ... and the dwarf, who was standing a few feet away staring at him intently. He seemed somehow familiar.

The widow sipped daintily at her wine. "Some of the first elephants were women," she said, "the ones who brought the tigers down and ended the old wars. Trianna was returned four times. That was three hundred years ago, alas. Volantis has had no female triarch since, though some women have the vote. Women of good birth who dwell in ancient palaces behind the Black Walls, not creatures such as me. The Old Blood will have their dogs and children voting before any freedman. No, it will be Belicho, or perhaps Alios, but either way it will be war. Or so they think."

"And what do you think?" Ser Jorah asked.

Good, thought Tyrion. *The right question*. "Oh, I think it will be war as well, but not the war they want." The old woman leaned forward, her black eyes gleaming. "I think that red R'hllor has more worshipers in this city than all the other gods together. Have you heard Benerro preach?"

"Last night."

"Benerro can see the morrow in his flames," the widow said. "Triarch Malaquo tried to hire the Golden Company, did you know? He meant to clean out the red temple and put Benerro to the sword. He dare not use tiger cloaks. Half of them worship the Lord of Light as well. Oh, these are dire days in Old Volantis, even for wrinkled old widows. But not half so dire as in Meereen, I think. So tell me, ser ... why do you seek the silver queen?"

"That is my concern. I can pay for our passage and pay well. I have the silver."

Fool, thought Tyrion. *It's not coin she wants, it's respect. Haven't you heard a word she's said?* He glanced back over his shoulder again. The dwarf had moved closer to their table. And he seemed to have a knife in his hand. The hairs on the back of Tyrion's neck began to prickle.

“Keep your silver. I have gold. And spare me your black looks, ser. I am too old to be frightened of a scowl. You are a hard man, I see, and no doubt skilled with that long sword at your side, but this is my realm. Let me crook a finger and you may find yourself traveling to Meereen chained to an oar in the belly of a galley.” She lifted her jade fan and opened it. There was a rustle of leaves, and a man slid from the overgrown archway to her left. His face was a mass of scars, and in one hand he held a sword, short and heavy as a cleaver. “*Seek the widow of the waterfront*, someone told you, but they should have also warned you, *beware the widow’s sons*. It is such a sweet morning, though, I shall ask again. Why would you seek Daenerys Targaryen, whom half the world wants dead?”

Jorah Mormont’s face was dark with anger, but he answered. “To serve her. Defend her. Die for her, if need be.”

That made the widow laugh. “You want to *rescue* her, is that the way of it? From more enemies than I can name, with swords beyond count ... *this* is what you’d have the poor widow believe? That you are a true and chivalrous Westerosi knight crossing half the world to come to the aid of this ... well, she is no maiden, though she may still be fair.” She laughed again. “Do you think your dwarf will please her? Will she bathe in his blood, do you think, or content herself with striking off his head?”

Ser Jorah hesitated. “The dwarf is—”

“—I know who the dwarf is, and what he is.” Her black eyes turned to Tyrion, hard as stone. “Kinslayer, kingslayer, murderer, turncloak. *Lannister*.” She made the last a curse. “What do *you* plan to offer the dragon queen, little man?”

My hate, Tyrion wanted to say. Instead he spread his hands as far as the fetters would allow. “Whatever she would have of me. Sage counsel, savage wit, a bit of tumbling. My cock, if she desires it. My tongue, if she does not. I will lead her armies or rub her feet, as she desires. And the only reward I ask is I might be allowed to rape and kill my sister.”

That brought the smile back to the old woman’s face. “This one at least is honest,” she announced, “but you, ser ... I have known a dozen Westerosi

knights and a thousand adventurers of the same ilk, but none so pure as you would paint yourself. Men are beasts, selfish and brutal. However gentle the words, there are always darker motives underneath. I do not trust you, ser.” She flicked them off with her fan, as if they were no more than flies buzzing about her head. “If you want to get to Meereen, swim. I have no help to give you.”

Then seven hells broke out at once.

Ser Jorah started to rise, the widow snapped her fan closed, her scarred man slid out of the shadows ... and behind them a girl screamed. Tyrion spun just in time to see the dwarf rushing toward him. *She’s a girl*, he realized all at once, *a girl dressed up in man’s clothes. And she means to gut me with that knife.*

For half a heartbeat Ser Jorah, the widow, and the scarred man stood still as stone. Idlers watched from nearby tables, sipping ale and wine, but no one moved to interfere. Tyrion had to move both hands at once, but his chains had just enough give for him to reach the flagon on the table. He closed his fist around it, spun, dashed its contents into the face of the charging dwarf girl, then threw himself to one side to avoid her knife. The flagon shattered underneath him as the floor came up to smack him in the head. Then the girl was on him once again. Tyrion rolled on one side as she buried the knife blade in the floorboards, yanked it free, raised it again ...

... and suddenly she was rising off the floor, legs kicking wildly as she struggled in Ser Jorah’s grasp. “No!” she wailed, in the Common Tongue of Westeros. “Let go!” Tyrion heard her tunic rip as she fought to free herself.

Mormont had her by the collar with one hand. With the other he wrenched the dagger from her grasp. “Enough.”

The landlord made his appearance then, a cudgel in his hand. When he saw the broken flagon, he uttered a blistering curse and demanded to know what had happened here. “Dwarf fight,” replied the Tyroshi with the purple beard, chuckling.

Tyrion blinked up at the dripping girl twisting in the air. “Why?” he demanded. “What did I ever do to you?”

“They killed him.” All the fight went out of her at that. She hung limply in Mormont’s grasp as her eyes filled with tears. “My brother. They took him and they killed him.”

“Who killed him?” asked Mormont. “Sailors. Sailors from the Seven Kingdoms. There were five of them, drunk. They saw us jousting in the square and followed us. When they realized I was a girl they let me go, but they took my brother and killed him. *They cut his head off.*”

Tyrion felt a sudden shock of recognition. *They saw us jousting in the square.* He knew who the girl was then. “Did you ride the pig?” he asked her. “Or the dog?”

“The dog,” she sobbed. “Oppo always rode the pig.”

The dwarfs from Joffrey’s wedding. It was their show that had started all the trouble that night. *How strange, to encounter them again half a world away.* Though perhaps not so strange as that. *If they had half the wits of their pig, they would have fled King’s Landing the night Joff died, before Cersei could assign them some share of blame in her son’s death.* “Let her down, ser,” he told Ser Jorah Mormont. “She won’t do us any harm.”

Ser Jorah dumped the dwarf girl on the floor. “I am sorry for your brother ... but we had no part in his murder.”

“He did.” The girl pushed herself to her knees, clutching her torn, wine-drenched tunic to small, pale breasts. “It was him they wanted. They thought Oppo was *him*.” The girl was weeping, begging for help from anyone who would listen. “He should die, the way my poor brother died. Please. Someone help me. Someone kill him.” The landlord seized her roughly by one arm and wrenched her back to her feet, shouting in Volantene, demanding to know who was going to pay for this damage.

The widow of the waterfront gave Mormont a cool look. “Knights defend the weak and protect the innocent, they say. And I am the fairest maid in all

Volantis.” Her laugh was full of scorn. “What do they call you, child?”

“Penny.”

The old woman called out to the landlord in the tongue of Old Volantis. Tyrion knew enough to understand that she was telling him to take the dwarf girl up to her rooms, give her wine, and find some clothes for her to wear.

When they were gone, the widow studied Tyrion, her black eyes shining. “Monsters should be larger, it seems to me. You are worth a lordship back in Westeros, little man. Here, I fear, your worth is somewhat less. But I think I had best help you after all. Volantis is no safe place for dwarfs, it seems.”

“You are too kind.” Tyrion gave her his sweetest smile. “Perhaps you would remove these charming iron bracelets as well? This monster has but half a nose, and it itches most abominably. The chains are too short for me to scratch it. I’ll make you a gift of them, and gladly.”

“How generous. But I have worn iron in my time, and now I find that I prefer gold and silver. And sad to say, this is Volantis, where fetters and chains are cheaper than day-old bread and it is forbidden to help a slave escape.”

“I’m no slave.”

“Every man ever taken by slavers sings that same sad song. I dare not help you ... here.” She leaned forward again. “Two days from now, the cog *Selaesori Qhoran* will set sail for Qarth by way of New Ghis, carrying tin and iron, bales of wool and lace, fifty Myrish carpets, a corpse pickled in brine, twenty jars of dragon peppers, and a red priest. Be on her when she sails.”

“We will,” said Tyrion, “and thank you.”

Ser Jorah frowned. “Qarth is not our destination.”

“She will never reach Qarth. Benerro has seen it in his fires.” The crone smiled a vulpine smile.

“As you say.” Tyrion grinned. “If I were Volantene, and free, and had the blood, you’d have my vote for triarch, my lady.”

“I am no lady,” the widow replied, “just Vogarro’s whore. You want to be gone from here before the tigers come. Should you reach your queen, give her a message from the slaves of Old Volantis.” She touched the faded scar upon her wrinkled cheek, where her tears had been cut away. “Tell her we are waiting. Tell her to come soon.”