

TYRION

“They have my son,” Tywin Lannister said.

“They do, my lord.” The messenger’s voice was dulled by exhaustion. On the breast of his torn surcoat, the brindled boar of Crakehall was half-obscured by dried blood.

One of your sons, Tyrion thought. He took a sip of wine and said not a word, thinking of Jaime. When he lifted his arm, pain shot through his elbow, reminding him of his own brief taste of battle. He loved his brother, but he would not have wanted to be with him in the Whispering Wood for all the gold in Casterly Rock.

His lord father’s assembled captains and bannermen had fallen very quiet as the courier told his tale. The only sound was the crackle and hiss of the log burning in the hearth at the end of the long, drafty common room.

After the hardships of the long relentless drive south, the prospect of even a single night in an inn had cheered Tyrion mightily... though he rather wished it had not been *this* inn again, with all its memories. His father had set a grueling pace, and it had taken its toll. Men wounded in the battle kept up as best they could or were abandoned to fend for themselves. Every morning they left a few more by the roadside, men who went to sleep never to wake. Every afternoon a few more collapsed along the way. And every evening a few more deserted, stealing off into the dusk. Tyrion had been half-tempted to go with them.

He had been upstairs, enjoying the comfort of a featherbed and the warmth of Shae’s body beside him, when his squire had woken him to say that a rider had arrived with dire news of Riverrun. So it had all been for nothing. The rush south, the endless forced marches, the bodies left beside the road... all for naught. Robb Stark had reached Riverrun days and days ago.

“How could this happen?” Ser Harys Swyft moaned. “*How?* Even after the Whispering Wood, you had Riverrun ringed in iron, surrounded by a

great host... what madness made Ser Jaime decide to split his men into three separate camps? Surely he knew how vulnerable that would leave them?"

Better than you, you chinless craven, Tyrion thought. Jaime might have lost Riverrun, but it angered him to hear his brother slandered by the likes of Swyft, a shameless lickspittle whose greatest accomplishment was marrying his equally chinless daughter to Ser Kevan, and thereby attaching himself to the Lannisters.

"I would have done the same," his uncle responded, a good deal more calmly than Tyrion might have. "You have never seen Riverrun, Ser Harys, or you would know that Jaime had little choice in the matter. The castle is situated at the end of the point of land where the Tumblestone flows into the Red Fork of the Trident. The rivers form two sides of a triangle, and when danger threatens, the Tullys open their sluice gates upstream to create a wide moat on the third side, turning Riverrun into an island. The walls rise sheer from the water, and from their towers the defenders have a commanding view of the opposite shores for many leagues around. To cut off all the approaches, a besieger must needs place one camp north of the Tumblestone, one south of the Red Fork, and a third between the rivers, west of the moat. There is no other way, none."

"Ser Kevan speaks truly, my lords," the courier said. "We'd built palisades of sharpened stakes around the camps, yet it was not enough, not with no warning and the rivers cutting us off from each other. They came down on the north camp first. No one was expecting an attack. Marq Piper had been raiding our supply trains, but he had no more than fifty men. Ser Jaime had gone out to deal with them the night before... well, with what we *thought* was them. We were told the Stark host was east of the Green Fork, marching south..."

"And your outriders?" Ser Gregor Clegane's face might have been hewn from rock. The fire in the hearth gave a somber orange cast to his skin and put deep shadows in the hollows of his eyes. "They saw nothing? They gave you no warning?"

The bloodstained messenger shook his head. “Our outriders had been vanishing. Marq Piper’s work, we thought. The ones who did come back had seen nothing.”

“A man who sees nothing has no use for his eyes,” the Mountain declared. “Cut them out and give them to your next outrider. Tell him you hope that four eyes might see better than two... and if not, the man after him will have six.”

Lord Tywin Lannister turned his face to study Ser Gregor. Tyrion saw a glimmer of gold as the light shone off his father’s pupils, but he could not have said whether the look was one of approval or disgust. Lord Tywin was oft quiet in council, preferring to listen before he spoke, a habit Tyrion himself tried to emulate. Yet this silence was uncharacteristic even for him, and his wine was untouched.

“You said they came at night,” Ser Kevan prompted.

The man gave a weary nod. “The Blackfish led the van, cutting down our sentries and clearing away the palisades for the main assault. By the time our men knew what was happening, riders were pouring over the ditch banks and galloping through the camp with swords and torches in hand. I was sleeping in the west camp, between the rivers. When we heard the fighting and saw the tents being fired, Lord Brax led us to the rafts and we tried to pole across, but the current pushed us downstream and the Tullys started flinging rocks at us with the catapults on their walls. I saw one raft smashed to kindling and three others overturned, men swept into the river and drowned... and those who did make it across found the Starks waiting for them on the riverbanks.”

Ser Flement Brax wore a silver-and-purple tabard and the look of a man who cannot comprehend what he has just heard. “My lord father—”

“Sorry, my lord,” the messenger said. “Lord Brax was clad in plate-and-mail when his raft overturned. He was very gallant.”

He was a fool, Tyrion thought, swirling his cup and staring down into the winy depths. Crossing a river at night on a crude raft, wearing armor, with an enemy waiting on the other side—if that was gallantry, he would

take cowardice every time. He wondered if Lord Brax had felt especially gallant as the weight of his steel pulled him under the black water.

“The camp between the rivers was overrun as well,” the messenger was saying. “While we were trying to cross, more Starks swept in from the west, two columns of armored horse. I saw Lord Umber’s giant-in-chains and the Mallister eagle, but it was the boy who led them, with a monstrous wolf running at his side. I wasn’t there to see, but it’s said the beast killed four men and ripped apart a dozen horses. Our spearmen formed up a shieldwall and held against their first charge, but when the Tullys saw them engaged, they opened the gates of Riverrun and Tytos Blackwood led a sortie across the drawbridge and took them in the rear.”

“Gods save us,” Lord Lefford swore.

“Greatjon Umber fired the siege towers we were building, and Lord Blackwood found Ser Edmure Tully in chains among the other captives, and made off with them all. Our south camp was under the command of Ser Forley Prester. He retreated in good order when he saw that the other camps were lost, with two thousand spears and as many bowmen, but the Tyroshi sellsword who led his freeriders struck his banners and went over to the foe.”

“Curse the man.” His uncle Kevan sounded more angry than surprised. “I warned Jaime not to trust that one. A man who fights for coin is loyal only to his purse.”

Lord Tywin wove his fingers together under his chin. Only his eyes moved as he listened. His bristling golden side-whiskers framed a face so still it might have been a mask, but Tyrion could see tiny beads of sweat dappling his father’s shaven head.

“How could it *happen*?” Ser Harys Swyft wailed again. “Ser Jaime taken, the siege broken... this is a *catastrophe*!”

Ser Addam Marbrand said, “I am sure we are all grateful to you for pointing out the obvious, Ser Harys. The question is, what shall we do about it?”

“What *can* we do? Jaime’s host is all slaughtered or taken or put to flight, and the Starks and the Tullys sit squarely across our line of supply. We are cut off from the west! They can march on Casterly Rock if they so choose, and what’s to stop them? My lords, we are beaten. We must sue for peace.”

“Peace?” Tyrion swirled his wine thoughtfully, took a deep draft, and hurled his empty cup to the floor, where it shattered into a thousand pieces. “There’s your peace, Ser Harys. My sweet nephew broke it for good and all when he decided to ornament the Red Keep with Lord Eddard’s head. You’ll have an easier time drinking wine from that cup than you will convincing Robb Stark to make peace now. He’s *winning*... or hadn’t you noticed?”

“Two battles do not make a war,” Ser Addam insisted. “We are far from lost. I should welcome the chance to try my own steel against this Stark boy.”

“Perhaps they would consent to a truce, and allow us to trade our prisoners for theirs,” offered Lord Lefford.

“Unless they trade three-for-one, we still come out light on those scales,” Tyrion said acidly. “And what are we to offer for my brother? Lord Eddard’s rotting head?”

“I had heard that Queen Cersei has the Hand’s daughters,” Lefford said hopefully. “If we give the lad his sisters back...”

Ser Addam snorted disdainfully. “He would have to be an utter ass to trade Jaime Lannister’s life for two girls.”

“Then we must ransom Ser Jaime, whatever it costs,” Lord Lefford said.

Tyrion rolled his eyes. “If the Starks feel the need for gold, they can melt down Jaime’s armor.”

“if we ask for a truce, they will think us weak,” Ser Addam argued. “We should march on them at once.”

“Surely our friends at court could be prevailed upon to join us with fresh troops,” said Ser Harys. “And someone might return to Casterly Rock

to raise a new host.”

Lord Tywin Lannister rose to his feet. “*They have my son,*” he said once more, in a voice that cut through the babble like a sword through suet. “Leave me. All of you.”

Ever the soul of obedience, Tyrion rose to depart with the rest, but his father gave him a look. “Not you, Tyrion. Remain. And you as well, Kevan. The rest of you, out.”

Tyrion eased himself back onto the bench, startled into speechlessness. Ser Kevan crossed the room to the wine casks. “Uncle,” Tyrion called, “if you would be so kind—”

“Here.” His father offered him his cup, the wine untouched.

Now Tyrion truly *was* nonplussed. He drank.

Lord Tywin seated himself. “You have the right of it about Stark. Alive, we might have used Lord Eddard to forge a peace with Winterfell and Riverrun, a peace that would have given us the time we need to deal with Robert’s brothers. Dead...” His hand curled into a fist. “Madness. Rank madness.”

“Joff’s only a boy,” Tyrion pointed out. “At his age, I committed a few follies of my own.”

His father gave him a sharp look. “I suppose we ought to be grateful that he has not yet married a whore.”

Tyrion sipped at his wine, wondering how Lord Tywin would look if he flung the cup in his face.

“Our position is worse than you know,” his father went on. “It would seem we have a new king.”

Ser Kevan looked poleaxed. “A new—*who*? What have they done to Joffrey?”

The faintest flicker of distaste played across Lord Tywin’s thin lips. “Nothing... yet. My grandson still sits the Iron Throne, but the eunuch has heard whispers from the south. Renly Baratheon wed Margaery Tyrell at Highgarden this fortnight past, and now he has claimed the crown. The bride’s father and brothers have bent the knee and sworn him their swords.”

“Those are grave tidings.” When Ser Kevan frowned, the furrows in his brow grew deep as canyons.

“My daughter commands us to ride for King’s Landing at once, to defend the Red Keep against King Renly and the Knight of Flowers.” His mouth tightened. “*Commands* us, mind you. In the name of the king and council.”

“How is King Joffrey taking the news?” Tyrion asked with a certain black amusement.

“Cersei has not seen fit to tell him yet,” Lord Tywin said. “She fears he might insist on marching against Renly himself.”

“With what army?” Tyrion asked. “You don’t plan to give him *this* one, I hope?”

“He talks of leading the City Watch,” Lord Tywin said.

“If he takes the Watch, he’ll leave the city undefended,” Ser Kevan said. “And with Lord Stannis on Dragonstone...”

“Yes.” Lord Tywin looked down at his son. “I had thought you were the one made for motley, Tyrion, but it would appear that I was wrong.”

“Why, Father,” said Tyrion, “that almost sounds like praise.” He leaned forward intently. “What of Stannis? He’s the elder, not Renly. How does he feel about his brother’s claim?”

His father frowned. “I have felt from the beginning that Stannis was a greater danger than all the others combined. Yet he does nothing. Oh, Varys hears his whispers. Stannis is building ships, Stannis is hiring sellswords, Stannis is bringing a shadowbinder from Asshai. What does it mean? Is any of it true?” He gave an irritated shrug. “Kevan, bring us the map.”

Ser Kevan did as he was bid. Lord Tywin unrolled the leather, smoothing it flat. “Jaime has left us in a bad way. Roose Bolton and the remnants of his host are north of us. Our enemies hold the Twins and Moat Cailin. Robb Stark sits to the west, so we cannot retreat to Lannisport and the Rock unless we choose to give battle. Jaime is taken, and his army for all purposes has ceased to exist. Thoros of Myr and Beric Dondarrion continue to plague our foraging parties. To our east we have the Arryns,

Stannis Baratheon sits on Dragonstone, and in the south Highgarden and Storm's End are calling their banners."

Tyion smiled crookedly. "Take heart, Father. At least Rhaegar Targaryen is still dead."

"I had hoped you might have more to offer us than japes, Tyion," Lord Tywin Lannister said.

Ser Kevan frowned over the map, forehead creasing. "Robb Stark will have Edmure Tully and the lords of the Trident with him now. Their combined power may exceed our own. And with Roose Bolton behind us... Tywin, if we remain here, I fear we might be caught between three armies."

"I have no intention of remaining here. We must finish our business with young Lord Stark before Renly Baratheon can march from Highgarden. Bolton does not concern me. He is a wary man, and we made him warier on the Green Fork. He will be slow to give pursuit. So... on the morrow, we make for Harrenhal. Kevan, I want Ser Addam's outriders to screen our movements. Give him as many men as he requires, and send them out in groups of four. I will have no vanishings."

"As you say, my lord, but... why Harrenhal? That is a grim, unlucky place. Some call it cursed."

"Let them," Lord Tywin said. "Unleash Ser Gregor and send him before us with his reavers. Send forth Vargo Hoat and his freeriders as well, and Ser Amory Lorch. Each is to have three hundred horse. Tell them I want to see the riverlands afire from the Gods Eye to the Red Fork."

"They will burn, my lord," Ser Kevan said, rising. "I shall give the commands." He bowed and made for the door.

When they were alone, Lord Tywin glanced at Tyion. "Your savages might relish a bit of rapine. Tell them they may ride with Vargo Hoat and plunder as they like—goods, stock, women, they may take what they want and burn the rest."

"Telling Shagga and Timett how to pillage is like telling a rooster how to crow," Tyion commented, "but I should prefer to keep them with me." Uncouth and unruly they might be, yet the wildlings were *his*, and he

trusted them more than any of his father's men. He was not about to hand them over.

"Then you had best learn to control them. I will not have the city plundered."

"The city?" Tyrion was lost. "What city would that be?"

"King's Landing. I am sending you to court."

It was the last thing Tyrion Lannister would ever have anticipated.

He reached for his wine, and considered for a moment as he sipped. "And what am I to do there?"

"Rule," his father said curtly.

Tyrion hooted with laughter. "My sweet sister might have a word or two to say about that!"

"Let her say what she likes. Her son needs to be taken in hand before he ruins us all. I blame those jackanapes on the council—our friend Petyr, the venerable Grand Maester, and that cockless wonder Lord Varys. What sort of counsel are they giving Joffrey when he lurches from one folly to the next? Whose notion was it to make this Janos Slynt a lord? The man's father was a butcher, and they grant him Harrenhal. *Harrenhal*, that was the seat of kings! Not that he will ever set foot inside it, if I have a say. I am told he took a bloody spear for his sigil. A bloody cleaver would have been my choice." His father had not raised his voice, yet Tyrion could see the anger in the gold of his eyes. "And dismissing Selmy, where was the sense in that? Yes, the man was old, but the name of Barristan the Bold still has meaning in the realm. He lent honor to any man he served. Can anyone say the same of the Hound? You feed your dog bones under the table, you do not seat him beside you on the high bench." He pointed a finger at Tyrion's face. "If Cersei cannot curb the boy, you must. And if these councillors are playing us false..."

Tyrion knew. "Spikes," he sighed. "Heads. Walls."

"I see you have taken a few lessons from me."

"More than you know, Father," Tyrion answered quietly. He finished his wine and set the cup aside, thoughtful. A part of him was more pleased

than he cared to admit. Another part was remembering the battle upriver, and wondering if he was being sent to hold the left again. “Why me?” he asked, cocking his head to one side. “Why not my uncle? Why not Ser Addam or Ser Flement or Lord Serrett? Why not a... *bigger* man?”

Lord Tywin rose abruptly. “You are my son.”

That was when he knew. *You have given him up for lost, he thought. You bloody bastard, you think Jaime’s good as dead, so I’m all you have left.* Tyrion wanted to slap him, to spit in his face, to draw his dagger and cut the heart out of him and see if it was made of old hard gold, the way the smallfolks said. Yet he sat there, silent and still.

The shards of the broken cup crunched beneath his father’s heels as Lord Tywin crossed the room. “One last thing,” he said at the door. “You will not take the whore to court.”

Tyrion sat alone in the common room for a long while after his father was gone. Finally he climbed the steps to his cozy garret beneath the bell tower. The ceiling was low, but that was scarcely a drawback for a dwarf. From the window, he could see the gibbet his father had erected in the yard. The innkeep’s body turned slowly on its rope whenever the night wind gusted. Her flesh had grown as thin and ragged as Lannister hopes.

Shae murmured sleepily and rolled toward him when he sat on the edge of the featherbed. He slid his hand under the blanket and cupped a soft breast, and her eyes opened. “M’lord,” she said with a drowsy smile.

When he felt her nipple stiffen, Tyrion kissed her. “I have a mind to take you to King’s Landing, sweetling,” he whispered.