

TYRION

The pile of parchments was formidably high. Tyrion looked at it and sighed. “I had understood you were a band of brothers. Is this the love a brother bears a brother? Where is the trust? The friendship, the fond regard, the deep affection that only men who have fought and bled together can ever know?”

“All in time,” said Brown Ben Plumm. “After you sign,” said Inkpots, sharpening a quill.

Kasporio the Cunning touched his sword hilt. “If you would like to start the bleeding now, I will happ’y oblige you.”

“How kind of you to offer,” said Tyrion. “I think not.”

Inkpots placed the parchments before Tyrion and handed him the quill. “Here is your ink. From Old Volantis, this. ’Twill last as long as proper maester’s black. All you need do is sign and pass the notes to me. I’ll do the rest.”

Tyrion gave him a crooked grin. “Might I read them first?”

“If you like. They are all the same, by and large. Except for the ones at the bottom, but we’ll get to those in due course.”

Oh, I am sure we will. For most men, there was no cost to joining a company, but he was not most men. He dipped the quill into the inkpot, leaned over the first parchment, paused, looked up. “Would you prefer me to sign *Yollo* or *Hugor Hill*?”

Brown Ben crinkled up his eyes. “Would you prefer to be returned to Yezzan’s heirs or just beheaded?”

The dwarf laughed and signed the parchment, *Tyrion of House Lannister*. As he passed it left to Inkpots, he riffled through the pile underneath.

“There are ... what, fifty? Sixty? I’d thought there were five hundred Second Sons.”

“Five hundred thirteen at present,” Inkpots said. “When you sign our book, we will be five hundred fourteen.”

“So only one in ten receives a note? That hardly seems fair. I thought you were all share-and-share-alike in the free companies.” He signed another sheet.

Brown Ben chuckled. “Oh, all share. But not alike. The Second Sons are not unlike a family ...”

“... and every family has its drooling cousins.” Tyrion signed another note. The parchment crinkled crisply as he slid it toward the paymaster. “There are cells down in the bowels of Casterly Rock where my lord father kept the worst of ours.” He dipped his quill in the inkpot. *Tyrion of House Lannister*, he scratched out, promising to pay the bearer of the note one hundred golden dragons. *Every stroke of the quill leaves me a little poorer ... or would, if I were not a beggar to begin with.* One day he might rue these signatures. *But not this day.* He blew on the wet ink, slid the parchment to the paymaster, and signed the one beneath. And again. And again. And again. “This wounds me deeply, I will have you know,” he told them between signatures. “In Westeros, the word of a Lannister is considered good as gold.”

Inkpots shrugged. “This is not Westeros. On this side of the narrow sea, we put our promises on paper.” As each sheet was passed to him, he scattered fine sand across the signature to drink up excess ink, shook it off, and set the note aside. “Debts written on the wind tend to be ... forgotten, shall we say?”

“Not by us.” Tyrion signed another sheet. And another. He had found a rhythm now. “A Lannister always pays his debts.”

Plumm chuckled. “Aye, but a sellsword’s word is worthless.”

Well, yours is, thought Tyrion, *and thank the gods for that.* “True, but I will not be a sellsword until I’ve signed your book.”

“Soon enough,” said Brown Ben. “After the notes.”

“I am dancing as fast as I can.” He wanted to laugh, but that would have ruined the game. Plumm was enjoying this, and Tyrion had no intention of spoiling his fun. *Let him go on thinking that he’s bent me over and fucked me up the arse, and I’ll go on buying steel swords with parchment dragons.* If ever he went back to Westeros to claim his birthright, he would have all the gold of Casterly Rock to make good on his promises. If not, well, he’d be dead, and his new brothers could wipe their arses with these parchments. Perhaps some might turn up in King’s Landing with their scraps in hand, hoping to convince his sweet sister to make good on them. *And would that I could be a roach in the rushes to witness that.*

The writing on the parchments changed about halfway down the pile. The hundred-dragon notes were all for serjeants. Below them the amounts suddenly grew larger. Now Tyrion was promising to pay the bearer one thousand golden dragons. He shook his head, laughed, signed. And again. And again. “So,” he said as he was scrawling, “what will be my duties with the company?”

“You are too ugly to be Bokkoko’s butt boy,” said Kasporio, “but you might do as arrow fodder.”

“Better than you know,” said Tyrion, refusing to rise to the bait. “A small man with a big shield will drive the archers mad. A wiser man than you once told me that.”

“You will work with Inkpots,” said Brown Ben Plumm. “You will work *for* Inkpots,” said Inkpots. “Keeping books, counting coin, writing contracts and letters.”

“Gladly,” said Tyrion. “I love books.”

“What else would you do?” sneered Kasporio. “Look at you. You are not fit to fight.”

“I once had charge of all the drains in Casterly Rock,” Tyrion said mildly. “Some of them had been stopped up for years, but I soon had them draining merrily away.” He dipped the quill in the ink again. Another dozen notes, and he would be done. “Perhaps I could supervise your camp followers. We can’t have the men stopped up, now can we?”

That jape did not please Brown Ben. “Stay away from the whores,” he warned. “Most o’ them are poxy, and they talk. You’re not the first escaped slave to join the company, but that don’t mean we need to shout your presence. I won’t have you parading about where you might be seen. Stay inside as much as you can, and shit into your bucket. Too many eyes at the latrines. And never go beyond our camp without my leave. We can dress you up in squire’s steel, pretend you’re Jorah’s butt boy, but there’s some will see right through that. Once Meereen is taken and we’re away to Westeros, you can prance about all you like in gold and crimson. Till then, though ...”

“... I shall live beneath a rock and never make a sound. You have my word on that.” *Tyrion of House Lannister*, he signed once more, with a flourish. That was the last parchment. Three notes remained, different from the rest. Two were written on fine vellum and made out by name. For Kasporio the Cunning, ten thousand dragons. The same for Inkpots, whose true name appeared to be Tybero Istarion. “*Tybero?*” said Tyrion. “That sounds almost Lannister. Are you some long-lost cousin?”

“Perhaps. I always pay my debts as well. It is expected of a paymaster. Sign.”

He signed.

Brown Ben’s note was the last. That one had been inscribed upon a sheepskin scroll. *One hundred thousand golden dragons, fifty hides of fertile land, a castle, and a lordship. Well and well. This Plumm does not come cheaply.* Tyrion plucked at his scar and wondered if he ought to make a show of indignation. When you bugger a man you expect a squeal or two. He could curse and swear and rant of robbery, refuse to sign for a time, then give in reluctantly, protesting all the while. But he was sick of mummery, so instead he grimaced, signed, and handed the scroll back to Brown Ben.

“Your cock is as big as in the stories,” he said. “Consider me well and truly fucked, Lord Plumm.”

Brown Ben blew on his signature. “My pleasure, Imp. And now, we make you one o’ us. Inkpots, fetch the book.”

The book was leather-bound with iron hinges, and large enough to eat your supper off. Inside its heavy wooden boards were names and dates going back more than a century. “The Second Sons are amongst the oldest of the free companies,” Inkpots said as he was turning pages. “This is the fourth book. The names of every man to serve with us are written here. When they joined, where they fought, how long they served, the manner of their deaths—all in the book. You will find famous names in here, some from your Seven Kingdoms. Aegor Rivers served a year with us, before he left to found the Golden Company. Bittersteel, you call him. The Bright Prince, Aerion Targaryen, he was a Second Son. And Rodrik Stark, the Wandering Wolf, him as well. No, not that ink. Here, use this.” He unstopped a new pot and set it down.

Tyrion cocked his head. “Red ink?”

“A tradition of the company,” Inkpots explained. “There was a time when each new man wrote his name in his own blood, but as it happens, blood makes piss-poor ink.”

“Lannisters love tradition. Lend me your knife.”

Inkpots raised an eyebrow, shrugged, slipped his dagger from its sheath, and handed it across hiltfirst. *It still hurts, Halfmaester, thank you very much*, thought Tyrion, as he pricked the ball of his thumb. He squeezed a fat drop of blood into the inkpot, traded the dagger for a fresh quill, and scrawled, *Tyrion of House Lannister, Lord of Casterly*

Rock, in a big bold hand, just below Jorah Mormont’s far more modest signature.

And it’s done. The dwarf rocked back on the camp stool. “Is that all that you require of me? Don’t I need to swear an oath? Kill a baby? Suck the

captain's cock?"

"Suck whatever you like." Inkpots turned the book around and dusted the page with a bit of fine sand. "For most of us, the signature suffices, but I would hate to disappoint a new brother-in-arms. Welcome to the Second Sons, Lord Tyrion."

Lord Tyrion. The dwarf liked the sound of that. The Second Sons might not enjoy the shining reputation of the Golden Company, but they had won some famous victories over the centuries. "Have other lords served with the company?"

"Landless lords," said Brown Ben. "Like you, Imp."

Tyrion hopped down from the stool. "My previous brother was entirely unsatisfactory. I hope for more from my new ones. Now how do I go about securing arms and armor?"

"Will you want a pig to ride as well?" asked Kasporio. "Why, I did not know your wife was in the company," said Tyrion. "That's kind of you to offer her, but I would prefer a horse."

The bravo reddened, but Inkpots laughed aloud and Brown Ben went so far as to chuckle. "Inkpots, show him to the wagons. He can have his pick from the company steel. The girl too. Put a helm on her, a bit o' mail, might be some will take her for a boy."

"Lord Tyrion, with me." Inkpots held the tent flap to let him waddle through. "I will have Snatch take you to the wagons. Get your woman and meet him by the cook tent."

"She is not my woman. Perhaps you should get her. All she does of late is sleep and glare at me."

"You need to beat her harder and fuck her more often," the paymaster offered helpfully. "Bring her, leave her, do what you will. Snatch will not care. Come find me when you have your armor, and I will start you on the ledgers."

“As you wish.”

Tyrion found Penny asleep in a corner of their tent, curled up on a thin straw pallet beneath a heap of soiled bedclothes. When he touched her with the toe of his boot, she rolled over, blinked at him, and yawned. “Hugor? What is it?”

“Talking again, are we?” It was better than her usual sullen silence. *All over an abandoned dog and pig. I saved the two of us from slavery, you would think some gratitude might be in order.* “If you sleep any longer, you’re like to miss the war.”

“I’m sad.” She yawned again. “And tired. So tired.”

Tired or sick? Tyrion knelt beside her pallet. “You look pale.” He felt her brow. *Is it hot in here, or does she have a touch of fever?* He dared not ask that question aloud. Even hard men like the Second Sons were terrified of mounting the pale mare. If they thought Penny was sick, they would drive her off without a moment’s hesitation. *They might even return us to Yezzan’s heirs, notes or no notes.* “I have signed their book. The old way, in blood. I am now a Second Son.”

Penny sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “What about me? Can I sign too?”

“I think not. Some free companies have been known to take women, but ... well, they are not Second Daughters, after all.”

“*We*,” she said. “If you’re one of them, you should say *we*, not *they*. Has anyone seen Pretty Pig? Inkpots said he’d ask after her. Or Crunch, has there been word of Crunch?”

Only if you trust Kasporio. Plumm’s not-so-cunning second-in-command claimed that three Yunkish slave-catchers were prowling through the camps, asking after a pair of escaped dwarfs. One of them was carrying a tall spear with a dog’s head impaled upon its point, the way that Kaspo told it. Such tidings were not like to get Penny out of bed, however. “No word as yet,” he lied. “Come. We need to find some armor for you.”

She gave him a wary look. “Armor? Why?”

“Something my old master-at-arms told me. ‘Never go to battle naked, lad,’ he said. I take him at his word. Besides, now that I’m a sellsword, I really ought to have a sword to sell.” She still showed no signs of moving. Tyrion seized her by the wrist, pulled her to her feet, and threw a fistful of clothing into her face. “Dress. Wear the cloak with the hood and keep your head down. We’re supposed to be a pair of likely lads, just in case the slave-catchers are watching.”

Snatch was waiting by the cook tent chewing sourleaf when the two dwarfs turned up, cloaked and hooded. “I hear the two o’ you are going to fight for us,” the serjeant said. “That should have them pissing in Meereen. Either o’ you ever killed a man?”

“I have,” said Tyrion. “I swat them down like flies.”

“What with?”

“An axe, a dagger, a choice remark. Though I’m deadliest with my crossbow.”

Snatch scratched at his stubble with the point of his hook. “Nasty thing, a crossbow. How many men you kill with that?”

“Nine.” His father counted for at least that many, surely. Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, Shield of Lannisport, Hand of the King, husband, brother, father, father, father.

“Nine.” Snatch snorted and spat out a mouthful of red slime. Aiming for Tyrion’s feet, perhaps, but it landed on his knee. Plainly that was what he thought of “nine.” The serjeant’s fingers were stained a mottled red from the juice of the sourleaf he chewed. He put two of them into his mouth and whistled. “*Kem!* Get over here, you fucking pisspot.” Kem came running. “Take Lord and Lady Imp to the wagons, have Hammer fix them up with some company steel.”

“Hammer might be passed-out drunk,” Kem cautioned. “Piss in his face. That’ll wake him up.” Snatch turned back to Tyrion and Penny. “We never had no bloody dwarfs before, but boys we never lacked for. Sons o’ this whore or that one, little fools run off from home to have adventures, butt boys, squires, and the like. Some o’ their shit might be small enough to fit imps. It’s the shit they were wearing when they died, like as not, but I know that won’t bother fuckers fierce as you two. Nine, was it?” He shook his head and walked away.

The Second Sons kept their company armor in six big wayns drawn up near the center of their camp. Kem led the way, swinging his spear as if it were a staff. “How does a King’s Landing lad end up with a free company?” Tyrion asked him.

The lad gave him a wary squint. “Who told you I was from King’s Landing?”

“No one.” *Every word out of your mouth reeks of Flea Bottom.* “Your wits gave you away. There’s no one clever as a Kingslander, they say.”

That seemed to startle him. “Who says that?”

“Everyone.” *Me.* “Since when?”

Since I just made it up. “For ages,” he lied. “My father was wont to say it. Did you know Lord Tywin, Kem?”

“The Hand. Once I saw him riding up the hill. His men had red cloaks and little lions on their helms. I liked those helms.” His mouth tightened. “I never liked the Hand, though. He sacked the city. And then he smashed us on the Blackwater.”

“You were there?”

“With Stannis. Lord Tywin come up with Renly’s ghost and took us in the flank. I dropped my spear and ran, but at the ships this bloody knight said, ‘Where’s your spear, boy? We got no room for cravens,’ and they buggered off and left me, and thousands more besides. Later I heard how your father

was sending them as fought with Stannis to the Wall, so I made my way across the narrow sea and joined up with the Second Sons.”

“Do you miss King’s Landing?”

“Some. I miss this boy, he ... he was a friend of mine. And my brother, Kennet, but he died on the bridge of ships.”

“Too many good men died that day.” Tyrion’s scar was itching fiercely. He picked at it with a fingernail.

“I miss the food too,” Kem said wistfully. “Your mother’s cooking?”

“Rats wouldn’t eat my mother’s cooking. There was this pot shop, though. No one ever made a bowl o’ brown like them. So thick you could stand your spoon up in the bowl, with chunks of this and that. You ever have yourself a bowl o’ brown, Halfman?”

“A time or two. Singer’s stew, I call it.”

“Why’s that?”

“It tastes so good it makes me want to sing.”

Kem liked that. “Singer’s stew. I’ll ask for that next time I get back to Flea Bottom. What do you miss, Halfman?”

Jaime, thought Tyrion. *Shae. Tysha. My wife, I miss my wife, the wife I hardly knew.* “Wine, whores, and wealth,” he answered. “Especially the wealth. Wealth will buy you wine and whores.” *It will also buy you swords, and the Kems to wield them.*

“Is it true the chamber pots in Casterly Rock are made of solid gold?” Kem asked him.

“You should not believe everything you hear. Especially where House Lannister is concerned.”

“They say all Lannisters are twisty snakes.”

“Snakes?” Tyrion laughed. “That sound you hear is my lord father, slithering in his grave. We are *lions*, or so we like to say. But it makes no matter, Kem. Step on a snake or a lion’s tail, you’ll end up just as dead.”

By then they had reached the armory, such as it was. The smith, this fabled Hammer, proved to be a freakish-looking hulk with a left arm that appeared twice as thick as his right. “He’s drunk more than not,” Kem said. “Brown Ben lets it go, but one day we’ll get us a real armorer.” Hammer’s apprentice was a wiry red-haired youth called Nail. *Of course. What else?* mused Tyrion. Hammer was sleeping off a drunk when they reached the forge, just as Kem had prophesied, but Nail had no objection to the two dwarfs clambering through the wagons. “Crap iron, most of it,” he warned them, “but you’re welcome to anything you can use.”

Under roofs of bent wood and stiffened leather, the wagon beds were heaped high with old weaponry and armor. Tyrion took one look and sighed, remembering the gleaming racks of swords and spears and halberds in the armory of the Lannisters below Casterly Rock. “This may take a while,” he declared.

“There’s sound steel here if you can find it,” a deep voice growled. “None of it is pretty, but it will stop a sword.”

A big knight stepped down from the back of a wagon, clad head to heel in company steel. His left greave did not match his right, his gorget was spotted with rust, his vambraces rich and ornate, inlaid with niello flowers. On his right hand was a gauntlet of lobstered steel, on his left a fingerless mitt of rusted mail. The nipples on his muscled breastplate had a pair of iron rings through them. His greathelm sported a ram’s horns, one of which was broken.

When he took it off, he revealed the battered face of Jorah Mormont. *He looks every inch a sellsword and not at all like the half-broken thing we took from Yezzan’s cage*, Tyrion reflected. His bruises had mostly faded by now, and the swelling in his face had largely subsided, so Mormont looked almost human once again ... though only vaguely like himself. The demon’s mask the slavers had burned into his right cheek to mark him for a dangerous and disobedient slave would never leave him. Ser Jorah had

never been what one might call a comely man. The brand had transformed his face into something frightening.

Tyrion grinned. “As long as I look prettier than you, I will be happy.” He turned to Penny. “You take that wagon. I’ll start with this one.”

“It will go faster if we look together.” She plucked up a rusted iron half-helm, giggled, and stuck it on her head. “Do I look fearsome?”

You look like a mummer girl with a pot on her head. “That’s a halfhelm. You want a greathelm.” He found one, and swapped it for the halfhelm.

“It’s too big.” Penny’s voice echoed hollowly inside the steel. “I can’t see out.” She took the helm off and flung it aside. “What’s wrong with the halfhelm?”

“It’s open-faced.” Tyrion pinched her nose. “I am fond of looking at your nose. I would rather that you kept it.”

Her eyes got big. “You like my nose?”

Oh, Seven save me. Tyrion turned away and began rooting amongst some piles of old armor toward the back of the wagon.

“Are there any other parts of me you like?” Penny asked.

Perhaps she meant that to sound playful. It sounded sad instead. “I am fond of all of your parts,” Tyrion said, in hopes of ending any further discussion of the subject, “and even fonder of mine own.”

“Why should we need armor? We’re only mummers. We just *pretend* to fight.”

“You pretend very well,” said Tyrion, examining a shirt of heavy iron mail so full of holes that it almost looked moth-eaten. *What sort of moths eat chainmail?* “Pretending to be dead is one way to survive a battle. Good armor is another.” *Though there is precious little of that here, I fear.* At the Green Fork, he had fought in mismatched scraps of plate from Lord Lefford’s wagons, with a spiked bucket helm that made it look as if

someone had upended a slops pail over his head. This company steel was worse. Not just old and ill fitting, but dented, cracked, and brittle. *Is that dried blood, or only rust?* He sniffed at it but still could not be sure.

“Here’s a crossbow.” Penny showed it to him.

Tyrion glanced at it. “I cannot use a stirrup winch. My legs are not long enough. A crank would serve me better.” Though, if truth be told, he did not want a crossbow. They took too long to reload. Even if he lurked by the latrine ditch waiting for some enemy to take a squat, the chances of his losing more than one quarrel would not be good.

Instead he picked up a morningstar, gave it a swing, put it down again. *Too heavy*. He passed over a warhammer (too long), a studded mace (also too heavy), and half a dozen longswords before he found a dirk he liked, a nasty piece of steel with a triangular blade. “This might serve,” he said. The blade had a bit of rust on it, but that would only make it nastier. He found a wood-and-leather sheath that fit and slipped the dirk inside.

“A little sword for a little man?” joked Penny. “It’s a dirk and made for a big man.” Tyrion showed her an old long-sword. “This is a sword. Try it.”

Penny took it, swung it, frowned. “Too heavy.”

“Steel weighs more than wood. Chop through a man’s neck with that thing, though, and his head is not like to turn into a melon.” He took the sword back from her and inspected it more closely. “Cheap steel. And notched. Here, see? I take back what I said. You need a better blade to hack off heads.”

“I don’t *want* to hack off heads.”

“Nor should you. Keep your cuts below the knee. Calf, hamstring, ankle ... even giants fall if you slice their feet off. Once they’re down, they’re no bigger than you.”

Penny looked as though she was about to cry. “Last night I dreamed my brother was alive again. We were jousting before some great lord, riding

Crunch and Pretty Pig, and men were throwing roses at us. We were so happy ...”

Tyrion slapped her.

It was a soft blow, all in all, a little flick of the wrist, with hardly any force behind it. It did not even leave a mark upon her cheek. But her eyes filled with tears all the same.

“If you want to dream, go back to sleep,” he told her. “When you wake up, we’ll still be escaped slaves in the middle of a siege. Crunch is dead. The pig as well, most like. Now find some armor and put it on, and never mind where it pinches. The mummer show is over. Fight or hide or shit yourself, as you like, but whatever you decide to do, you’ll do it clad in steel.”

Penny touched the cheek he’d slapped. “We should never have run. We’re not sellswords. We’re not any kind of swords. It wasn’t so bad with Yezzan. It wasn’t. Nurse was cruel sometimes but Yezzan never was. We were his favorites, his ... his ...”

“*Slaves*. The word you want is *slaves*.”

“Slaves,” she said, flushing. “We were his *special* slaves, though. Just like Sweets. His treasures.”

His pets, thought Tyrion. *And he loved us so much that he sent us to the pit, to be devoured by lions.*

She was not all wrong. Yezzan’s slaves ate better than many peasants back in the Seven Kingdoms and were less like to starve to death come winter. Slaves were chattels, aye. They could be bought and sold, whipped and branded, used for the carnal pleasure of their owners, bred to make more slaves. In that sense they were no more than dogs or horses. But most lords treated their dogs and horses well enough. Proud men might shout that they would sooner die free than live as slaves, but pride was cheap. When the steel struck the flint, such men were rare as dragon’s teeth; otherwise the world would not have been so full of slaves. *There has never been a slave*

who did not choose to be a slave, the dwarf reflected. Their choice may be between bondage and death, but the choice is always there.

Tyrion Lannister did not except himself. His tongue had earned him some stripes on the back in the beginning, but soon enough he had learned the tricks of pleasing Nurse and the noble Yezzan. Jorah Mormont had fought longer and harder, but he would have come to the same place in the end.

And Penny, well ...

Penny had been searching for a new master since the day her brother Groat had lost his head. *She wants someone to take care of her, someone to tell her what to do.*

It would have been too cruel to say so, however. Instead Tyrion said, “Yezzan’s special slaves did not escape the pale mare. They’re dead, the lot of them. Sweets was the first to go.” Their mammoth master had died on the day of their escape, Brown Ben Plumm had told him. Neither he nor Kasporio nor any of the other sellswords knew the fate of the denizens of Yezzan’s grotesquerie ... but if Pretty Penny needed lies to stop her mooning, lie to her he would. “If you want to be a slave again, I will find you a kind master when this war is done, and sell you for enough gold to get me home,” Tyrion promised her. “I’ll find you some nice Yunkishman to give you another pretty golden collar, with little bells on it that will tinkle everywhere you go. First, though, you will need to survive what’s coming. No one buys dead mummers.”

“Or dead dwarfs,” said Jorah Mormont. “We are all like to be feeding worms by the time this battle is done. The Yunkai’i have lost this war, though it may take them some time to know it. Meereen has an army of Unsullied infantry, the finest in the world. And Meereen has dragons. Three of them, once the queen returns. She will. She must. Our side consists of two score Yunkish lordlings, each with his own half-trained monkey men. Slaves on stilts, slaves in chains ... they may have troops of blind men and palsied children too, I would not put it past them.”

“Oh, I know,” said Tyrion. “The Second Sons are on the losing side. They need to turn their cloaks again and do it now.” He grinned. “Leave that to

me.”