



TYRION

Nothing remained beyond the King's Gate but mud and ashes and bits of burned bone, yet already there were people living in the shadow of the city walls, and others selling fish from barrows and barrels. Tyrion felt their eyes on him as he rode past; chilly eyes, angry and unsympathetic. No one dared speak to him, or try to bar his way; not with Bronn beside him in oiled black mail. *If I were alone, though, they would pull me down and smash my face in with a cobblestone, as they did for Preston Greenfield.*

"They come back quicker than the rats," he complained. "We burned them out once, you'd think they'd take that as a lesson."

"Give me a few dozen gold cloaks and I'll kill them all," said Bronn. "Once they're dead they don't come back."

"No, but others come in their places. Leave them be . . . but if they start throwing up hovels against the wall again, pull them down at once. The war's not done yet, no matter what these fools may think." He spied the Mud Gate up ahead. "I have seen enough for now. We'll return on the morrow with the guild masters to go over their plans." He sighed. *Well, I burned most of this, I suppose it's only just that I rebuild it.*

That task was to have been his uncle's, but solid, steady, tireless Ser Kevan Lannister had not been himself since the raven had come from Riverrun with word of his son's murder. Willem's twin Martyn had been taken captive by Robb Stark as well, and their elder brother Lancel was still

abed, beset by an ulcerating wound that would not heal. With one son dead and two more in mortal danger, Ser Kevan was consumed by grief and fear. Lord Tywin had always relied on his brother, but now he had no choice but to turn again to his dwarf son.

The cost of rebuilding was going to be ruinous, but there was no help for that. King's Landing was the realm's principal harbor, rivaled only by Oldtown. The river had to be reopened, and the sooner the better. *And where am I going to find the bloody coin?* It was almost enough to make him miss Littlefinger, who had sailed north a fortnight past. *While he beds Lysa Arryn and rules the Vale beside her, I get to clean up the mess he left behind him.* Though at least his father was giving him significant work to do. *He won't name me heir to Casterly Rock, but he'll make use of me wherever he can,* Tyrion thought, as a captain of gold cloaks waved them through the Mud Gate.

The Three Whores still dominated the market square inside the gate, but they stood idle now, and the boulders and barrels of pitch had all been trundled away. There were children climbing the towering wooden structures, swarming up like monkeys in roughspun to perch on the throwing arms and hoot at each other.

"Remind me to tell Ser Addam to post some gold cloaks here," Tyrion told Bronn as they rode between two of the trebuchets. "Some fool boy's like to fall off and break his back." There was a shout from above, and a clod of manure exploded on the ground a foot in front of them. Tyrion's mare reared and almost threw him. "On second thoughts," he said when he had the horse in hand, "let the poxy brats splatter on the cobbles like overripe melons."

He was in a black mood, and not just because a few street urchins wanted to pelt him with dung. His marriage was a daily agony. Sansa Stark remained a maiden, and half the castle seemed to know it. When they had saddled up this morning, he'd heard two of the stableboys sniggering behind his back. He could almost imagine that the horses were sniggering as well. He'd risked his skin to avoid the bedding ritual, hoping to preserve the privacy of his bedchamber, but that hope had been dashed quick enough. Either Sansa had been stupid enough to confide in one of her

bedmaids, every one of whom was a spy for Cersei, or Varys and his little birds were to blame.

What difference did it make? They were laughing at him all the same. The only person in the Red Keep who didn't seem to find his marriage a source of amusement was his lady wife.

Sansa's misery was deepening every day. Tyrion would gladly have broken through her courtesy to give her what solace he might, but it was no good. No words would ever make him fair in her eyes. *Or any less a Lannister.* This was the wife they had given him, for all the rest of his life, and she hated him.

And their nights together in the great bed were another source of torment. He could no longer bear to sleep naked, as had been his custom. His wife was too well trained ever to say an unkind word, but the revulsion in her eyes whenever she looked on his body was more than he could bear. Tyrion had commanded Sansa to wear a sleeping shift as well. *I want her*, he realized. *I want Winterfell, yes, but I want her as well, child or woman or whatever she is. I want to comfort her. I want to hear her laugh. I want her to come to me willingly, to bring me her joys and her sorrows and her lust.* His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. *Yes, and I want to be tall as Jaime and as strong as Ser Gregor the Mountain too, for all the bloody good it does.*

Unbidden, his thoughts went to Shae. Tyrion had not wanted her to hear the news from any lips but his own, so he had commanded Varys to bring her to him the night before his wedding. They met again in the eunuch's chambers, and when Shae began to undo the laces of his jerkin, he'd caught her by the wrist and pushed her away. "Wait," he said, "there is something you must hear. On the morrow I am to be wed . . ."

" . . . to Sansa Stark. I know."

He was speechless for an instant. Even *Sansa* did not know, not then. "How could you know? Did Varys tell you?"

"Some page was telling Ser Tallad about it when I took Lollys to the sept. He had it from this serving girl who heard Ser Kevan talking to your father." She wriggled free of his grasp and pulled her dress up over her head. As ever, she was naked underneath. "I don't care. She's only a little girl. You'll give her a big belly and come back to me."

Some part of him had hoped for less indifference. *Had hoped*, he jeered bitterly, *but now you know better, dwarf. Shae is all the love you're ever like to have.*

Muddy Way was crowded, but soldiers and townfolk alike made way for the Imp and his escort. Hollow-eyed children swarmed underfoot, some looking up in silent appeal whilst others begged noisily. Tyrion pulled a big fistful of coppers from his purse and tossed them in the air, and the children went running for them, shoving and shouting. The lucky ones might be able to buy a heel of stale bread tonight. He had never seen markets so crowded, and for all the food the Tyrells were bringing in, prices remained shockingly high. Six coppers for a melon, a silver stag for a bushel of corn, a dragon for a side of beef or six skinny piglets. Yet there seemed no lack of buyers. Gaunt men and haggard women crowded around every wagon and stall, while others even more ragged looked on sullenly from the mouths of alleys.

"This way," Bronn said, when they reached the foot of the Hook. "If you still mean to . . . ?"

"I do." The riverfront had made a convenient excuse, but Tyrion had another purpose today. It was not a task he relished, but it must be done. They turned away from Aegon's High Hill, into the maze of smaller streets that clustered around the foot of Visenya's. Bronn led the way. Once or twice Tyrion glanced back over his shoulder to see if they were being followed, but there was nothing to be seen except the usual rabble: a carter beating his horse, an old woman throwing nightsoil from her window, two little boys fighting with sticks, three gold cloaks escorting a captive . . . they all looked innocent, but any one of them could be his undoing. Varys had informers everywhere.

They turned at a corner, and again at the next, and rode slowly through a crowd of women at a well. Bronn led him along a curving wynd, through an alley, under a broken archway. They cut through the rubble where a house had burned and walked their horses up a shallow flight of stone steps. The buildings were close and poor. Bronn halted at the mouth of a crooked alley, too narrow for two to ride abreast. "There's two jags and then a dead end. The sink is in the cellar of the last building."

Tyrion swung down off his horse. “See that no one enters or leaves till I return. This won’t take long.” His hand went into his cloak, to make certain the gold was still there in the hidden pocket. Thirty dragons. *A bloody fortune, for a man like him.* He waddled up the alley quickly, anxious to be done with this.

The wine sink was a dismal place, dark and damp, walls pale with niter, the ceiling so low that Bronn would have had to duck to keep from hitting his head on the beams. Tyrion Lannister had no such problem. At this hour, the front room was empty but for a dead-eyed woman who sat on a stool behind a rough plank bar. She handed him a cup of sour wine and said, “In the back.”

The back room was even darker. A flickering candle burned on a low table, beside a flagon of wine. The man behind it scarce looked a danger; a short man—though all men were tall to Tyrion—with thinning brown hair, pink cheeks, and a little pot pushing at the bone buttons of his doeskin jerkin. In his soft hands he held a twelve-stringed woodharp more deadly than a longsword.

Tyrion sat across from him. “Symon Silver Tongue.”

The man inclined his head. He was bald on top. “My lord Hand,” he said.

“You mistake me. My father is the King’s Hand. I am no longer even a finger, I fear.”

“You shall rise again, I am sure. A man like you. My sweet lady Shae tells me you are newly wed. Would that you had sent for me earlier. I should have been honored to sing at your feast.”

“The last thing my wife needs is more songs,” said Tyrion. “As for Shae, we both know she is no lady, and I would thank you never to speak her name aloud.”

“As the Hand commands,” Symon said.

The last time Tyrion had seen the man, a sharp word had been enough to set him sweating, but it seemed the singer had found some courage somewhere. *Most like in that flagon.* Or perhaps Tyrion himself was to blame for this new boldness. *I threatened him, but nothing ever came of the*

threat, so now he believes me toothless. He sighed. “I am told you are a very gifted singer.”

“You are most kind to say so, my lord.”

Tyrion gave him a smile. “I think it is time you brought your music to the Free Cities. They are great lovers of song in Braavos and Pentos and Lys, and generous with those who please them.” He took a sip of wine. It was foul stuff, but strong. “A tour of all nine cities would be best. You wouldn’t want to deny anyone the joy of hearing you sing. A year in each should suffice.” He reached inside his cloak, to where the gold was hidden. “With the port closed, you will need to go to Duskendale to take ship, but my man Bronn will find a horse for you, and I would be honored if you would let me pay your passage . . .”

“But my lord,” the man objected, “you have never heard me sing. Pray listen a moment.” His fingers moved deftly over the strings of the woodharp, and soft music filled the cellar. Symon began to sing.

*He rode through the streets of the city,
down from his hill on high,
O’er the wynds and the steps and the cobbles,
he rode to a woman’s sigh.
For she was his secret treasure,
she was his shame and his bliss.
And a chain and a keep are nothing,
compared to a woman’s kiss.*

“There’s more,” the man said as he broke off. “Oh, a good deal more. The refrain is especially nice, I think. *For hands of gold are always cold, but a woman’s hands are warm . . .*”

“Enough.” Tyrion slid his fingers from his cloak, empty. “That’s not a song I would care to hear again. Ever.”

“No?” Symon Silver Tongue put his harp aside and took a sip of wine. “A pity. Still, each man has his song, as my old master used to say when he was teaching me to play. Others might like my tune better. The queen, perhaps. Or your lord father.”

Tyrion rubbed the scar over his nose, and said, “My father has no time for singers, and my sister is not as generous as one might think. A wise man

could earn more from silence than from song.” He could not put it much plainer than that.

Symon seemed to take his meaning quick enough. “You will find my price modest, my lord.”

“That’s good to know.” This would not be a matter of thirty golden dragons, Tyrion feared. “Tell me.”

“At King Joffrey’s wedding feast,” the man said, “there is to be a tournament of singers.”

“And jugglers, and jesters, and dancing bears.”

“Only one dancing bear, my lord,” said Symon, who had plainly attended Cersei’s arrangements with far more interest than Tyrion had, “but seven singers. Galyeon of Cuy, Bethany Fair-fingers, Aemon Costayne, Alaric of Eysen, Hamish the Harper, Collio Quaynis, and Orland of Oldtown will compete for a gilded lute with silver strings . . . yet unaccountably, no invitation has been forthcoming for one who is master of them all.”

“Let me guess. Symon Silver Tongue?”

Symon smiled modestly. “I am prepared to prove the truth of my boast before king and court. Hamish is old, and oft forgets what he is singing. And Collio, with that absurd Tyroshi accent! If you understand one word in three, count yourself fortunate.”

“My sweet sister has arranged the feast. Even if I could secure you this invitation, it might look queer. Seven kingdoms, seven vows, seven challenges, seventy-seven dishes . . . but *eight* singers? What would the High Septon think?”

“You did not strike me as a pious man, my lord.”

“Piety is not the point. Certain forms must be observed.”

Symon took a sip of wine. “Still . . . a singer’s life is not without peril. We ply our trade in alehouses and wine sinks, before unruly drunkards. If one of your sister’s seven should suffer some mishap, I hope you might consider me to fill his place.” He smiled slyly, inordinately pleased with himself.

“Six singers would be as unfortunate as eight, to be sure. I will inquire after the health of Cersei’s seven. If any of them should be indisposed, my

man Bronn will find you.”

“Very good, my lord.” Symon might have left it at that, but flushed with triumph, he added, “I *shall* sing the night of King Joffrey’s wedding. Should it happen that I am called to court, why, I will want to offer the king my very best compositions, songs I have sung a thousand times that are certain to please. If I should find myself singing in some dreary winesink, though . . . well, that would be an apt occasion to try my new song. *For hands of gold are always cold, but a woman’s hands are warm.*”

“That will not be necessary,” said Tyrion. “You have my word as a Lannister, Bronn will call upon you soon.”

“Very *good*, my lord.” The balding kettle-bellied singer took up his woodharp again.

Bronn was waiting with the horses at the mouth of the alley. He helped Tyrion into his saddle. “When do I take the man to Duskendale?”

“You don’t.” Tyrion turned his horse. “Give him three days, then inform him that Hamish the Harper has broken his arm. Tell him that his clothes will never serve for court, so he must be fitted for new garb at once. He’ll come with you quick enough.” He grimaced. “You may want his tongue, I understand it’s made of silver. The rest of him should never be found.”

Bronn grinned. “There’s a pot shop I know in Flea Bottom makes a savory bowl of brown. All kinds of meat in it, I hear.”

“Make certain I never eat there.” Tyrion spurred to a trot. He wanted a bath, and the hotter the better.

Even that modest pleasure was denied him, however; no sooner had he returned to his chambers than Podrick Payne informed him that he had been summoned to the Tower of the Hand. “His lordship wants to see you. The Hand. Lord Tywin.”

“I recall who the Hand is, Pod,” Tyrion said. “I lost my nose, not my wits.”

Bronn laughed. “Don’t bite the boy’s head off now.”

“Why not? He never uses it.” Tyrion wondered what he’d done now. *Or more like, what I have failed to do.* A summons from Lord Tywin always

had teeth; his father never sent for him just to share a meal or a cup of wine, that was for certain.

As he entered his lord father's solar a few moments later, he heard a voice saying, ". . . cherrywood for the scabbards, bound in red leather and ornamented with a row of lion's-head studs in pure gold. Perhaps with garnets for the eyes . . ."

"Rubies," Lord Tywin said. "Garnets lack the fire."

Tyrion cleared his throat. "My lord. You sent for me?"

His father glanced up. "I did. Come have a look at this." A bundle of oilcloth lay on the table between them, and Lord Tywin had a longsword in his hand. "A wedding gift for Joffrey," he told Tyrion. The light streaming through the diamond-shaped panes of glass made the blade shimmer black and red as Lord Tywin turned it to inspect the edge, while the pommel and crossguard flamed gold. "With this fool's jabber of Stannis and his magic sword, it seemed to me that we had best give Joffrey something extraordinary as well. A king should bear a kingly weapon."

"That's much too much sword for Joff," Tyrion said.

"He will grow into it. Here, feel the weight of it." He offered the weapon hilt first.

The sword was much lighter than he had expected. As he turned it in his hand he saw why. Only one metal could be beaten so thin and still have strength enough to fight with, and there was no mistaking those ripples, the mark of steel that has been folded back on itself many thousands of times. "Valyrian steel?"

"Yes," Lord Tywin said, in a tone of deep satisfaction.

At long last, Father? Valyrian steel blades were scarce and costly, yet thousands remained in the world, perhaps two hundred in the Seven Kingdoms alone. It had always irked his father that none belonged to House Lannister. The old Kings of the Rock had owned such a weapon, but the greatsword Brightroar had been lost when the second King Tommen carried it back to Valyria on his fool's quest. He had never returned; nor had Uncle Gery, the youngest and most reckless of his father's brothers, who had gone seeking after the lost sword some eight years past.

Thrice at least Lord Tywin had offered to buy Valyrian longswords from impoverished lesser houses, but his advances had always been firmly rebuffed. The little lordlings would gladly part with their daughters should a Lannister come asking, but they cherished their old family swords.

Tyrion wondered where the metal for this one had come from. A few master armorers could rework old Valyrian steel, but the secrets of its making had been lost when the Doom came to old Valyria. “The colors are strange,” he commented as he turned the blade in the sunlight. Most Valyrian steel was a grey so dark it looked almost black, as was true here as well. But blended into the folds was a red as deep as the grey. The two colors lapped over one another without ever touching, each ripple distinct, like waves of night and blood upon some steely shore. “How did you get this patterning? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Nor I, my lord,” said the armorer. “I confess, these colors were not what I intended, and I do not know that I could duplicate them. Your lord father had asked for the crimson of your House, and it was that color I set out to infuse into the metal. But Valyrian steel is stubborn. These old swords remember, it is said, and they do not change easily. I worked half a hundred spells and brightened the red time and time again, but always the color would darken, as if the blade was drinking the sun from it. And some folds would not take the red at all, as you can see. If my lords of Lannister are displeased, I will of course try again, as many times as you should require, but—”

“No need,” Lord Tywin said. “This will serve.”

“A crimson sword might flash prettily in the sun, but if truth be told I like these colors better,” said Tyrion. “They have an ominous beauty . . . and they make this blade unique. There is no other sword like it in all the world, I should think.”

“There is one.” The armorer bent over the table and unfolded the bundle of oilcloth, to reveal a second longsword.

Tyrion put down Joffrey’s sword and took up the other. If not twins, the two were at least close cousins. This one was thicker and heavier, a half-inch wider and three inches longer, but they shared the same fine clean lines and the same distinctive color, the ripples of blood and night. Three fullers,

deeply incised, ran down the second blade from hilt to point; the king's sword had only two. Joff's hilt was a good deal more ornate, the arms of its crossguard done as lions' paws with ruby claws unsheathed, but both swords had grips of finely tooled red leather and gold lions' heads for pommels.

"Magnificent." Even in hands as unskilled as Tyrion's, the blade felt alive. "I have never felt better balance."

"It is meant for my son."

No need to ask which son. Tyrion placed Jaime's sword back on the table beside Joffrey's, wondering if Robb Stark would let his brother live long enough to wield it. *Our father must surely think so, else why have this blade forged?*

"You have done good work, Master Mott," Lord Tywin told the armorer. "My steward will see to your payment. And remember, rubies for the scabbards."

"I shall, my lord. You are most generous." The man folded the swords up in the oilcloth, tucked the bundle under one arm, and went to his knee. "It is an honor to serve the King's Hand. I shall deliver the swords the day before the wedding."

"See that you do."

When the guards had seen the armorer out, Tyrion clambered up onto a chair. "So . . . a sword for Joff, a sword for Jaime, and not even a dagger for the dwarf. Is that the way of it, Father?"

"The steel was sufficient for two blades, not three. If you have need of a dagger, take one from the armory. Robert left a hundred when he died. Gerion gave him a gilded dagger with an ivory grip and a sapphire pommel for a wedding gift, and half the envoys who came to court tried to curry favor by presenting His Grace with jewel-encrusted knives and silver inlay swords."

Tyrion smiled. "They'd have pleased him more if they'd presented him with their daughters."

"No doubt. The only blade he ever used was the hunting knife he had from Jon Arryn, when he was a boy." Lord Tywin waved a hand, dismissing

King Robert and all his knives. “What did you find at the riverfront?”

“Mud,” said Tyrion, “and a few dead things no one’s bothered to bury. Before we can open the port again, the Blackwater’s going to have to be dredged, the sunken ships broken up or raised. Three-quarters of the quays need repair, and some may have to be torn down and rebuilt. The entire fish market is gone, and both the River Gate and the King’s Gate are splintered from the battering Stannis gave them and should be replaced. I shudder to think of the cost.” *If you do shit gold, Father, find a privy and get busy*, he wanted to say, but he knew better.

“You will find whatever gold is required.”

“Will I? Where? The treasury is empty, I’ve told you that. We’re not done paying the alchemists for all that wildfire, or the smiths for my chain, and Cersei’s pledged the crown to pay half the costs of Joff’s wedding—seventy-seven bloody courses, a thousand guests, a pie full of doves, singers, jugglers . . .”

“Extravagance has its uses. We must demonstrate the power and wealth of Casterly Rock for all the realm to see.”

“Then perhaps Casterly Rock should pay.”

“Why? I have seen Littlefinger’s accounts. Crown incomes are ten times higher than they were under Aerys.”

“As are the crown’s expenses. Robert was as generous with his coin as he was with his cock. Littlefinger borrowed heavily. From you, amongst others. Yes, the incomes are considerable, but they are barely sufficient to cover the usury on Littlefinger’s loans. Will you forgive the throne’s debt to House Lannister?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“Then perhaps seven courses would suffice. Three hundred guests instead of a thousand. I understand that a marriage can be just as binding *without* a dancing bear.”

“The Tyrells would think us niggardly. I will have the wedding *and* the waterfront. If you cannot pay for them, say so, and I shall find a master of coin who can.”

The disgrace of being dismissed after so short a time was not something Tyrion cared to suffer. “I will find your money.”

“You will,” his father promised, “and while you are about it, see if you can find your wife’s bed as well.”

So the talk has reached even him. “I have, thank you. It’s that piece of furniture between the window and the hearth, with the velvet canopy and the mattress stuffed with goose down.”

“I am pleased you know of it. Now perhaps you ought to try and know the woman who shares it with you.”

Woman? Child, you mean. “Has a spider been whispering in your ear, or do I have my sweet sister to thank?” Considering the things that went on beneath Cersei’s blankets, you would think she’d have the decency to keep her nose out of his. “Tell me, why is it that all of Sansa’s maids are women in Cersei’s service? I am sick of being spied upon in my own chambers.”

“If you mislike your wife’s servants, dismiss them and hire ones more to your liking. That is your right. It is your wife’s maidenhood that concerns me, not her maids. This . . . delicacy puzzles me. You seem to have no difficulty bedding whores. Is the Stark girl made differently?”

“Why do you take so much bloody interest in where I put my cock?” Tyrion demanded. “Sansa is too young.”

“She is old enough to be Lady of Winterfell once her brother is dead. Claim her maidenhood and you will be one step closer to claiming the north. Get her with child, and the prize is all but won. Do I need to remind you that a marriage that has not been consummated can be set aside?”

“By the High Septon or a Council of Faith. Our present High Septon is a trained seal who barks prettily on command. Moon Boy is more like to annul my marriage than he is.”

“Perhaps I should have married Sansa Stark to Moon Boy. He might have known what to do with her.”

Tyrion’s hands clenched on the arms of his chair. “I have heard all I mean to hear on the subject of my wife’s maidenhead. But so long as we are discussing marriage, why is it that I hear nothing of my sister’s impending nuptials? As I recall—”

Lord Tywin cut him off. “Mace Tyrell has refused my offer to marry Cersei to his heir Willas.”

“*Refused* our sweet Cersei?” That put Tyrion in a *much* better mood.

“When I first broached the match to him, Lord Tyrell seemed well enough disposed,” his father said. “A day later, all was changed. The old woman’s work. She hectors her son unmercifully. Varys claims she told him that your sister was too old and too *used* for this precious one-legged grandson of hers.”

“Cersei must have loved that.” He laughed.

Lord Tywin gave him a chilly look. “She does not know. Nor will she. It is better for all of us if the offer was never made. See that you remember that, Tyrion. *The offer was never made.*”

“What offer?” Tyrion rather suspected that Lord Tyrell might come to regret this rebuff.

“Your sister *will* be wed. The question is, to whom? I have several thoughts—” Before he could get to them, there was a rap at the door and a guardsman stuck in his head to announce Grand Maester Pycelle. “He may enter,” said Lord Tywin.

Pycelle tottered in on a cane, and stopped long enough to give Tyrion a look that would curdle milk. His once-magnificent white beard, which someone had unaccountably shaved off, was growing back sparse and wispy, leaving him with unsightly pink wattles to dangle beneath his neck. “My lord Hand,” the old man said, bowing as deeply as he could without falling, “there has been another bird from Castle Black. Mayhaps we could consult privily?”

“There’s no need for that.” Lord Tywin waved Grand Maester Pycelle to a seat. “Tyrion may stay.”

Ooooooh, may I? He rubbed his nose, and waited.

Pycelle cleared his throat, which involved a deal of coughing and hawking. “The letter is from the same Bowen Marsh who sent the last. The castellan. He writes that Lord Mormont has sent word of wildlings moving south in vast numbers.”

“The lands beyond the Wall cannot support vast numbers,” said Lord Tywin firmly. “This warning is not new.”

“This last is, my lord. Mormont sent a bird from the haunted forest, to report that he was under attack. More ravens have returned since, but none with letters. This Bowen Marsh fears Lord Mormont slain, with all his strength.”

Tyrian had rather liked old Jeor Mormont, with his gruff manner and talking bird. “Is this certain?” he asked.

“It is not,” Pycelle admitted, “but none of Mormont’s men have returned as yet. Marsh fears the wildlings have killed them, and that the Wall itself may be attacked next.” He fumbled in his robe and found the paper. “Here is his letter, my lord, a plea to all five kings. He wants men, as many men as we can send him.”

“Five kings?” His father was annoyed. “There is one king in Westeros. Those fools in black might try and remember that if they wish His Grace to heed them. When you reply, tell him that Renly is dead and the others are traitors and pretenders.”

“No doubt they will be glad to learn it. The Wall is a world apart, and news oft reaches them late.” Pycelle bobbed his head up and down. “What shall I tell Marsh concerning the men he begs for? Shall we convene the council . . .”

“There is no need. The Night’s Watch is a pack of thieves, killers, and baseborn churls, but it occurs to me that they *could* prove otherwise, given proper discipline. If Mormont is indeed dead, the black brothers must choose a new Lord Commander.”

Pycelle gave Tyrian a sly glance. “An excellent thought, my lord. I know the very man. Janos Slynt.”

Tyrian liked that notion not at all. “The black brothers choose their own commander,” he reminded them. “Lord Slynt is new to the Wall. I know, I sent him there. Why should they pick *him* over a dozen more senior men?”

“Because,” his father said, in a tone that suggested Tyrian was quite the simpleton, “if they do not vote as they are told, their Wall will melt before it sees another man.”

Yes, that would work. Tyrion hitched forward. “Janos Slynt is the wrong man, Father. We’d do better with the commander of the Shadow Tower. Or Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.”

“The commander of the Shadow Tower is a Mallister of Seagard. Eastwatch is held by an ironman.” Neither would serve his purposes, Lord Tywin’s tone said clear enough.

“Janos Slynt is a butcher’s son,” Tyrion reminded his father forcefully. “You yourself told me—”

“I recall what I told you. Castle Black is not Harrenhal, however. The Night’s Watch is not the king’s council. There is a tool for every task, and a task for every tool.”

Tyrion’s anger flashed. “Lord Janos is a hollow suit of armor who will sell himself to the highest bidder.”

“I count that a point in his favor. Who is like to bid higher than us?” He turned to Pycelle. “Send a raven. Write that King Joffrey was deeply saddened to hear of Lord Commander Mormont’s death, but regrets that he can spare no men just now, whilst so many rebels and usurpers remain in the field. Suggest that matters might be quite different once the throne is secure . . . provided the king has full confidence in the leadership of the Watch. In closing, ask Marsh to pass along His Grace’s fondest regards to his faithful friend and servant, Lord Janos Slynt.”

“Yes, my lord.” Pycelle bobbed his withered head once more. “I shall write as the Hand commands. With great pleasure.”

I should have trimmed his head, not his beard, Tyrion reflected. *And Slynt should have gone for a swim with his dear friend Allar Deem.* At least he had not made the same foolish mistake with Symon Silver Tongue. *See there, Father?* he wanted to shout. *See how fast I learn my lessons?*