

TYRION

“I do not sleep as I did when I was younger,” Grand Maester Pycelle told him, by way of apology for the dawn meeting. “I would sooner be up, though the world be dark, than lie restless abed, fretting on tasks undone,” he said—though his heavy-lidded eyes made him look half-asleep as he said it.

In the airy chambers beneath the rookery, his girl served them boiled eggs, stewed plums, and porridge, while Pycelle served the pontifications. “In these sad times, when so many hunger, I think it only fitting to keep my table spare.”

“Commendable,” Tyrion admitted, breaking a large brown egg that reminded him unduly of the Grand Maester’s bald spotted head. “I take a different view. If there is food I eat it, in case there is none on the morrow.” He smiled. “Tell me, are your ravens early risers as well?”

Pycelle stroked the snowy beard that flowed down his chest. “To be sure. Shall I send for quill and ink after we have eaten?”

“No need.” Tyrion laid the letters on the table beside his porridge, twin parchments tightly rolled and sealed with wax at both ends. “Send your girl away, so we can talk.”

“Leave us, child,” Pycelle commanded. The serving girl hurried from the room. “These letters, now...”

“For the eyes of Doran Martell, Prince of Dorne.” Tyrion peeled the cracked shell away from his egg and took a bite. It wanted salt. “One letter, in two copies. Send your swiftest birds. The matter is of great import.”

“I shall dispatch them as soon as we have broken our fast.”

“Dispatch them now. Stewed plums will keep. The realm may not. Lord Renly is leading his host up the roseroad, and no one can say when Lord Stannis will sail from Dragonstone.”

Pycelle blinked. “If my lord prefers—”

“He does.”

“I am here to serve.” The maester pushed himself ponderously to his feet his chain of office clinking softly. It was a heavy thing, a dozen maester’s collars threaded around and through each other and ornamented with gemstones. And it seemed to Tyrion that the gold and silver and platinum links far outnumbered those of baser metals.

Pycelle moved so slowly that Tyrion had time to finish his egg and taste the plums—overcooked and watery, to his taste—before the sound of wings prompted him to rise. He spied the raven, dark in the dawn sky, and turned briskly toward the maze of shelves at the far end of the room.

The maester’s medicines made an impressive display; dozens of pots sealed with wax, hundreds of stoppered vials, as many milkglass bottles, countless jars of dried herbs, each container neatly labeled in Pycelle’s precise hand. *An orderly mind*, Tyrion reflected, and indeed, once you puzzled out the arrangement, it was easy to see that every potion had its place. *And such interesting things*. He noted sweetsleep and nightshade, milk of the poppy, the tears of Lys, powdered greycap, wolfsbane and demon’s dance, basilisk venom, blindeye, widow’s blood...

Standing on his toes and straining upward, he managed to pull a small dusty bottle off the high shelf. When he read the label, he smiled and slipped it up his sleeve.

He was back at the table peeling another egg when Grand Maester Pycelle came creeping down the stairs. “It is done, my lord.” The old man seated himself. “A matter like this... best done promptly, indeed, indeed... of great import, you say?”

“Oh, yes.” The porridge was too thick, Tyrion felt, and wanted butter and honey. To be sure, butter and honey were seldom seen in King’s Landing of late, though Lord Gyles kept them well supplied in the castle. Half of the food they ate these days came from his lands or Lady Tanda’s. Rosby and Stokeworth lay near the city to the north, and were yet untouched by war.

“The Prince of Dorne, himself. Might I ask...”

“Best not.”

“As you say.” Pycelle’s curiosity was so ripe that Tyrion could almost taste it. “Mayhaps... the king’s council...”

Tyrion tapped his wooden spoon against the edge of the bowl. “The council exists to *advise* the king, Maester.”

“Just so,” said Pycelle, “and the king—”

“—is a boy of thirteen. I speak with his voice.”

“So you do. Indeed. The King’s Own Hand. Yet... your most gracious sister, our Queen Regent, she...”

“...bears a great weight upon those lovely white shoulders of hers. I have no wish to add to her burdens. Do you?” Tyrion cocked his head and gave the Grand Maester an inquiring stare.

Pycelle dropped his gaze back to his food. Something about Tyrion’s mismatched green-and-black eyes made men squirm; knowing that, he made good use of them. “Ah,” the old man muttered into his plums. “Doubtless you have the right of it, my lord. It is most considerate of you to... spare her this... burden.”

“That’s just the sort of fellow I am.” Tyrion returned to the unsatisfactory porridge. “Considerate. Cersei is my own sweet sister, after all.”

“And a woman, to be sure,” Grand Maester Pycelle said. “A most uncommon woman, and yet... it is no small thing, to tend to all the cares of the realm, despite the frailty of her sex...”

Oh, yes, she’s a frail dove, just ask Eddard Stark. “I’m pleased you share my concern. And I thank you for the hospitality of your table. But a long day awaits.” He swung his legs out and clambered down from his chair. “Be so good as to inform me at once should we receive a reply from Dorne?”

“As you say, my lord.”

“And *only* me?”

“Ah... to be sure.” Pycelle’s spotted hand was clutching at his beard the way a drowning man clutches for a rope. It made Tyrion’s heart glad. *One*, he thought.

He waddled out into the lower bailey; his stunted legs complained of the steps. The sun was well up now, and the castle was stirring. Guardsmen walked the walls, and knights and men-at-arms were training with blunted weapons. Nearby, Bronn sat on the lip of a well. A pair of comely serving girls sauntered past carrying a wicker basket of rushes between them, but the sellsword never looked. “Bronn, I despair of you.” Tyrion gestured at the wenches. “With sweet sights like that before you, all you see is a gaggle of louts raising a clangor.”

“There are a hundred whorehouses in this city where a clipped copper will buy me all the cunt I want,” Bronn answered, “but one day my life may hang on how close I’ve watched your louts.” He stood. “Who’s the boy in the checkered blue surcoat with the three eyes on his shield?”

“Some hedge knight. Tallad, he names himself. Why?”

Bronn pushed a fall of hair from his eyes. “He’s the best of them. But watch him, he falls into a rhythm, delivering the same strokes in the same order each time he attacks.” He grinned. “That will be the death of him, the day he faces me.”

“He’s pledged to Joffrey; he’s not like to face you.” They set off across the bailey, Bronn matching his long stride to Tyrion’s short one. These days the sellsword was looking almost respectable. His dark hair was washed and brushed, he was freshly shaved, and he wore the black breastplate of an officer of the City Watch. From his shoulders trailed a cloak of Lannister crimson patterned with golden hands. Tyrion had made him a gift of it when he named him captain of his personal guard. “How many supplicants do we have today?” he inquired.

“Thirty odd,” answered Bronn. “Most with complaints, or wanting something, as ever. Your pet was back.”

He groaned. “Lady Tanda?”

“Her page. She invites you to sup with her again. There’s to be a haunch of venison, she says, a brace of stuffed geese sauced with mulberries, and—”

“—her daughter,” Tyrion finished sourly. Since the hour he had arrived in the Red Keep, Lady Tanda had been stalking him, armed with a never-ending arsenal of lamprey pies, wild boars, and savory cream stews. Somehow she had gotten the notion that a dwarf lordling would be the perfect consort for her daughter Lollys, a large, soft, dim-witted girl who rumor said was still a maid at thirty-and-three. “Send her my regrets.”

“No taste for stuffed goose?” Bronn grinned evilly.

“Perhaps you should eat the goose and marry the maid. Or better still, send Shagga.”

“Shagga’s more like to eat the maid and marry the goose,” observed Bronn. “Anyway, Lollys outweighs him.”

“There is that,” Tyrion admitted as they passed under the shadow of a covered walkway between two towers. “Who else wants me?”

The sellsword grew more serious. “There’s a moneylender from Braavos, holding fancy papers and the like, requests to see the king about payment on some loan.”

“As if Joff could count past twenty. Send the man to Littlefinger, he’ll find a way to put him off. Next?”

“A lordling down from the Trident, says your father’s men burned his keep, raped his wife, and killed all his peasants.”

“I believe they call that *war*.” Tyrion smelled Gregor Clegane’s work, or that of Ser Amory Lorch or his father’s other pet hellhound, the Qohorik. “What does he want of Joffrey?”

“New peasants,” Bronn said. “He walked all this way to sing how loyal he is and beg for recompense.”

“I’ll make time for him on the morrow.” Whether truly loyal or merely desperate, a compliant river lord might have his uses. “See that he’s given a comfortable chamber and a hot meal. Send him a new pair of boots as well, good ones, courtesy of King Joffrey.” A show of generosity never hurt.

Bronn gave a curt nod. “There’s also a great gaggle of bakers, butchers, and greengrocers clamoring to be heard.”

“I told them last time, I have nothing to give them.” Only a thin trickle of food was coming into King’s Landing, most of it earmarked for castle and garrison. Prices had risen sickeningly high on greens, roots, flour, and fruit, and Tyrion did not want to think about what sorts of flesh might be going into the kettles of the pot-shops down in Flea Bottom. Fish, he hoped. They still had the river and the sea... at least until Lord Stannis sailed.

“They want protection. Last night a baker was roasted in his own oven. The mob claimed he charged too much for bread.”

“Did he?”

“He’s not apt to deny it.”

“They didn’t eat him, did they?”

“Not that I’ve heard.”

“Next time they will,” Tyrion said grimly. “I give them what protection I can. The gold cloaks—”

“They claim there were gold cloaks in the mob,” Bronn said. “They’re demanding to speak to the king himself.”

“Fools.” Tyrion had sent them off with regrets; his nephew would send them off with whips and spears. He was half-tempted to allow it... but no, he dare not. Soon or late, some enemy would march on King’s Landing, and the last thing he wanted was willing traitors within the city walls. “Tell them King Joffrey shares their fears and will do all he can for them.”

“They want bread, not promises.”

“If I give them bread today, on the morrow I’ll have twice as many at the gates. Who else?”

“A black brother down from the Wall. The steward says he brought some rotted hand in a jar.”

Tyrion smiled wanly. “I’m surprised no one ate it. I suppose I ought to see him. It’s not Yoren, perchance?”

“No. Some knight. Thorne.”

“Ser *Alliser* Thorne?” Of all the black brothers he’d met on the Wall, Tyrion Lannister had liked Ser Alliser Thorne the least. A bitter, mean-spirited man with too great a sense of his own worth. “Come to think on it, I don’t believe I care to see Ser Alliser just now. Find him a snug cell where no one has changed the rushes in a year, and let his hand rot a little more.”

Bronn snorted laughter and went his way, while Tyrion struggled up the serpentine steps. As he limped across the outer yard, he heard the portcullis rattling up. His sister and a large party were waiting by the main gate.

Mounted on her white palfrey, Cersei towered high above him, a goddess in green. “Brother,” she called out, not warmly. The queen had not been pleased by the way he’d dealt with Janos Slynt.

“Your Grace.” Tyrion bowed politely. “You look lovely this morning.” Her crown was gold, her cloak ermine. Her retinue sat their mounts behind her: Ser Boros Blount of the Kingsguard, wearing white scale and his favorite scowl; Ser Balon Swann, bow slung from his silver-inlay saddle; Lord Gyles Rosby, his wheezing cough worse than ever; Hallyne the Pyromancer of the Alchemists’ Guild; and the queen’s newest favorite, their cousin Ser Lancel Lannister, her late husband’s squire upjumped to knight at his widow’s insistence. Vylarr and twenty guardsmen rode escort. “Where are you bound this day, sister?” Tyrion asked.

“I’m making a round of the gates to inspect the new scorpions and spitfires. I would not have it thought that all of us are as indifferent to the city’s defense as you seem to be.” Cersei fixed him with those clear green eyes of hers, beautiful even in their contempt. “I am informed that Renly Baratheon has marched from Highgarden. He is making his way up the roseroad, with all his strength behind him.”

“Varys gave me the same report.”

“He could be here by the full moon.”

“Not at his present leisurely pace,” Tyrion assured her. “He feasts every night in a different castle, and holds court at every crossroads he passes.”

“And every day, more men rally to his banners. His host is now said to be a hundred thousand strong.”

“That seems rather high.”

“He has the power of Storm’s End and Highgarden behind him, you little fool,” Cersei snapped down at him. “All the Tyrell bannermen but for the Redwynes, and you have me to thank for that. So long as I hold those poxy twins of his, Lord Paxter will squat on the Arbor and count himself fortunate to be out of it.”

“A pity you let the Knight of Flowers slip through your pretty fingers. Still, Renly has other concerns besides us. Our father at Harrenhal, Robb Stark at Riverrun... were I he, I would do much as he is doing. Make my progress, flaunt my power for the realm to see, watch, wait. Let my rivals contend while I bide my own sweet time. If Stark defeats us, the south will fall into Renly’s hands like a windfall from the gods, and he’ll not have lost a man. And if it goes the other way, he can descend on us while we are weakened.”

Cersei was not appeased. “I want you to make Father bring his army to King’s Landing.”

Where it will serve no purpose but to make you feel safe. “When have I ever been able to *make* Father do anything?”

She ignored the question. “And when do you plan to free Jaime? He’s worth a hundred of you.”

Tyrion grinned crookedly. “Don’t tell Lady Stark, I beg you. We don’t have a hundred of me to trade.”

“Father must have been mad to send you. You’re worse than useless.” The queen jerked on her reins and wheeled her palfrey around. She rode out the gate at a brisk trot, ermine cloak streaming behind her. Her retinue hastened after.

In truth, Renly Baratheon did not frighten Tyrion half so much as his brother Stannis did. Renly was beloved of the commons, but he had never before led men in war. Stannis was otherwise: hard, cold, inexorable. if only they had some way of knowing what was happening on Dragonstone... but not one of the fisherfolk he had paid to spy out the island had ever returned, and even the informers the eunuch claimed to have placed in Stannis’s

household had been ominously silent. The striped hulls of Lysene war galleys had been seen offshore, though, and Varys had reports from Myr of sellsail captains taking service with Dragonstone. *If Stannis attacks by sea while his brother Renly storms the gates, they'll soon be mounting Joffrey's head on a spike. Worse, mine will be beside him.* A depressing thought. He ought to make plans to get Shae safely out of the city, should the worst seem likely.

Podrick Payne stood at the door of his solar, studying the floor. "He's inside," he announced to Tyrion's belt buckle. "Your solar. My lord. Sorry."

Tyrion sighed. "*Look* at me, Pod. It unnerves me when you talk to my codpiece, especially when I'm not wearing one. Who is inside my solar?"

"Lord Littlefinger." Podrick managed a quick look at his face, then hastily dropped his eyes. "I meant, Lord Petyr. Lord Baelish. The master of coin. "

"You make him sound a crowd." The boy hunched down as if struck, making Tyrion feel absurdly guilty.

Lord Petyr was seated on his window seat, languid and elegant in a plush plum-colored doublet and a yellow satin cape, one gloved hand resting on his knee. "The king is fighting hares with a crossbow," he said. "The hares are winning. Come see."

Tyrion had to stand on his toes to get a look. A dead hare lay on the ground below; another, long ears twitching, was about to expire from the bolt in his side. Spent quarrels lay strewn across the hard-packed earth like straws scattered by a storm. "Now!" Joff shouted. The gamesman released the hare he was holding, and he went bounding off. Joffrey jerked the trigger on the crossbow. The bolt missed by two feet. The hare stood on his hind legs and twitched his nose at the king. Cursing, Joff spun the wheel to winch back his string, but the animal was gone before he was loaded. "Another!" The gamesman reached into the hutch. This one made a brown streak against the stones, while Joffrey's hurried shot almost took Ser Preston in the groin.

Littlefinger turned away. "Boy, are you fond of potted hare?" he asked Podrick Payne.

Pod stared at the visitor's boots, lovely things of red-dyed leather ornamented with black scrollwork. "To eat, my lord?"

"Invest in pots," Littlefinger advised. "Hares will soon overrun the castle. We'll be eating hare thrice a day."

"Better than rats on a skewer," said Tyrion. "Pod, leave us. Unless Lord Petyr would care for some refreshment?"

"Thank you, but no." Littlefinger flashed his mocking smile. "Drink with the dwarf, it's said, and you wake up walking the Wall. Black brings out my unhealthy pallor."

Have no fear, my lord, Tyrion thought, *it's not the Wall I have in mind for you.* He seated himself in a high chair piled with cushions and said, "You look very elegant today, my lord."

"I'm wounded. I strive to look elegant *every* day."

"Is the doublet new?"

"It is. You're most observant."

"Plum and yellow. Are those the colors of your House?"

"No. But a man gets bored wearing the same colors day in and day out, or so I've found."

"That's a handsome knife as well."

"Is it?" There was mischief in Littlefinger's eyes. He drew the knife and glanced at it casually, as if he had never seen it before. "Valyrian steel, and a dragonbone hilt. A trifle plain, though. It's yours, if you would like it."

"Mine?" Tyrion gave him a long look. "No. I think not. Never mine." *He knows, the insolent wretch. He knows and he knows that I know, and he thinks that I cannot touch him.*

If ever truly a man had armored himself in gold, it was Petyr Baelish, not Jaime Lannister. Jaime's famous armor was but gilded steel, but Littlefinger, ah... Tyrion had learned a few things about sweet Petyr, to his growing disquiet.

Ten years ago, Jon Arryn had given him a minor sinecure in customs, where Lord Petyr had soon distinguished himself by bringing in three times as much as any of the king's other collectors. King Robert had been a prodigious spender. A man like Petyr Baelish, who had a gift for rubbing two golden dragons together to breed a third, was invaluable to his Hand. Littlefinger's rise had been arrow-swift. Within three years of his coming to court, he was master of coin and a member of the small council, and today the crown's revenues were ten times what they had been under his beleaguered predecessor... though the crown's debts had grown vast as well. A master juggler was Petyr Baelish.

Oh, he was clever. He did not simply collect the gold and lock it in a treasure vault, no. He paid the king's debts in promises, and put the king's gold to work. He bought wagons, shops, ships, houses. He bought grain when it was plentiful and sold bread when it was scarce. He bought wool from the north and linen from the south and lace from Lys, stored it, moved it, dyed it, sold it. The golden dragons bred and multiplied, and Littlefinger lent them out and brought them home with hatchlings.

And in the process, he moved his own men into place. The Keepers of the Keys were his, all four. The King's Counter and the King's Scales were men he'd named. The officers in charge of all three mints. Harbormasters, tax farmers, customs sergeants, wool factors, toll collectors, pursers, wine factors; nine of every ten belonged to Littlefinger. They were men of middling birth, by and large; merchants' sons, lesser lordlings, sometimes even foreigners, but judging from their results, far more able than their highborn predecessors.

No one had ever thought to question the appointments, and why should they? Littlefinger was no threat to anyone. A clever, smiling, genial man, everyone's friend, always able to find whatever gold the king or his Hand required, and yet of such undistinguished birth, one step up from a hedge knight, he was not a man to fear. He had no banners to call, no army of retainers, no great stronghold, no holdings to speak of, no prospects of a great marriage.

But do I dare touch him? Tyrion wondered. *Even if he is a traitor?* He was not at all certain he could, least of all now, while the war raged. Given time, he could replace Littlefinger's men with his own in key positions, but...

A shout rang up from the yard. "Ah, His Grace has killed a hare," Lord Baelish observed.

"No doubt a slow one," Tyrion said. "My lord, you were fostered at Riverrun. I've heard it said that you grew close to the Tullys."

"You might say so. The girls especially."

"How close?"

"I had their maidenhoods. Is that close enough?"

The lie—Tyrion was fairly certain it was a lie—was delivered with such an air of nonchalance that one could almost believe it. Could it have been Catelyn Stark who lied? About her defloration, and the dagger as well? The longer he lived, the more Tyrion realized that nothing was simple and little was true. "Lord Hoster's daughters do not love me," he confessed. "I doubt they would listen to any proposal I might make. Yet coming from you, the same words might fall more sweetly on their ears. "

"That would depend on the words. If you mean to offer Sansa in return for your brother, waste someone else's time. Joffrey will never surrender his plaything, and Lady Catelyn is not so great a fool as to barter the Kingslayer for a slip of a girl."

"I mean to have Arya as well. I have men searching."

"Searching is not finding."

"I'll keep that in mind, my lord. In any case, it was Lady Lysa I hoped you might sway. For her, I have a sweeter offer."

"Lysa is more tractable than Catelyn, true... but also more fearful, and I understand she hates you."

"She believes she has good reason. When I was her guest in the Eyrie, she insisted that I murdered her husband and was not inclined to listen to denials." He leaned forward. "If I gave her Jon Arryn's true killer, she might think more kindly of me."

That made Littlefinger sit up. “True killer? I confess, you make me curious. Who do you propose?”

It was Tyrion’s turn to smile. “Gifts I give my friends, freely. Lysa Arryn would need to understand that.”

“Is it her friendship you require, or her swords?”

“Both.”

Littlefinger stroked the neat spike of his beard. “Lysa has woes of her own. Clansmen raiding out of the Mountains of the Moon, in greater numbers than ever before... and better armed.”

“Distressing,” said Tyrion Lannister, who had armed them. “I could help her with that. A word from me...”

“And what would this word cost her?”

“I want Lady Lysa and her son to acclaim Joffrey as king, to swear fealty, and to—”

“—make war on the Starks and Tullys?” Littlefinger shook his head. “There’s the roach in your pudding, Lannister. Lysa will never send her knights against Riverrun.”

“Nor would I ask it. We have no lack of enemies. I’ll use her power to oppose Lord Renly, or Lord Stannis, should he stir from Dragonstone. In return, I will give her justice for Jon Arryn and peace in the Vale. I will even name that appalling child of hers Warden of the East, as his father was before him.” *I want to see him fly*, a boy’s voice whispered faintly in memory. “And to seal the bargain, I will give her my niece.”

He had the pleasure of seeing a look of genuine surprise in Petyr Baelish’s grey-green eyes. “Myrcella?”

“When she comes of age, she can wed little Lord Robert. Until such time, she’ll be Lady Lysa’s ward at the Eyrie.”

“And what does Her Grace the queen think of this ploy?” When Tyrion shrugged, Littlefinger burst into laughter. “I thought not. You’re a dangerous little man, Lannister. Yes, I could sing this song to Lysa.” Again the sly smile, the mischief in his glance. “If I cared to.”

Tyrion nodded, waiting, knowing Littlefinger could never abide a long silence.

“So,” Lord Petyr continued after a pause, utterly unabashed, “what’s in your pot for me?”

“Harrenhal.”

It was interesting to watch his face. Lord Petyr’s father had been the smallest of small lords, his grandfather a landless hedge knight; by birth, he held no more than a few stony acres on the windswept shore of the Fingers. Harrenhal was one of the richest plums in the Seven Kingdoms, its lands broad and rich and fertile, its great castle as formidable as any in the realm... and so large as to dwarf Riverrun, where Petyr Baelish had been fostered by House Tully, only to be brusquely expelled when he dared raise his sights to Lord Hoster’s daughter.

Littlefinger took a moment to adjust the drape of his cape, but Tyrion had seen the flash of hunger in those sly cat’s eyes. *I have him*, he knew. “Harrenhal is cursed,” Lord Petyr said after a moment, trying to sound bored.

“Then raze it to the ground and build anew to suit yourself. You’ll have no lack of coin. I mean to make you liege lord of the Trident. These river lords have proven they cannot be trusted. Let them do you fealty for their lands.”

“Even the Tullys?”

“If there are any Tullys left when we are done.”

Littlefinger looked like a boy who had just taken a furtive bite from a honeycomb. He was *trying* to watch for bees, but the honey was so sweet. “Harrenhal and all its lands and incomes,” he mused. “With a stroke, you’d make me one of the greatest lords in the realm. Not that I’m ungrateful, my lord, but—why?”

“You served my sister well in the matter of the succession.”

“As did Janos Slynt. On whom this same castle of Harrenhal was quite recently bestowed—only to be snatched away when he was no longer of use.”

Tyrion laughed. "You have me, my lord. What can I say? I need you to deliver the Lady Lysa. I did not need Janos Slynt." He gave a crooked shrug. "I'd sooner have you seated in Harrenhal than Renly seated on the Iron Throne. What could be plainer?"

"What indeed. You realize that I may need to bed Lysa Arryn again to get her consent to this marriage?"

"I have little doubt you'll be equal to the task."

"I once told Ned Stark that when you find yourself naked with an ugly woman, the only thing to do is close your eyes and get on with it." Littlefinger steepled his fingers and gazed into Tyrion's mismatched eyes. "Give me a fortnight to conclude my affairs and arrange for a ship to carry me to Gulltown."

"That will do nicely."

His guest rose. "This has been quite the pleasant morning, Lannister. And profitable... for both of us, I trust." He bowed, his cape a swirl of yellow as he strode out the door.

Two, thought Tyrion.

He went up to his bedchamber to await Varys, who would soon be making an appearance. Evenfall, he guessed. Perhaps as late as moonrise, though he hoped not. He hoped to visit Shae tonight. He was pleasantly surprised when Galt of the Stone Crows informed him not an hour later that the powdered man was at his door. "You are a cruel man, to make the Grand Maester squirm so," the eunuch scolded. "The man cannot abide a secret."

"Is that a crow I hear, calling the raven black? Or would you sooner not hear what I've proposed to Doran Martell?"

Varys giggled. "Perhaps my little birds have told me."

"Have they, indeed?" He wanted to hear this. "Go on."

"The Dornishmen thus far have held aloof from these wars. Doran Martell has called his banners, but no more. His hatred for House Lannister is well known, and it is commonly thought he will join Lord Renly. You wish to dissuade him."

"All this is obvious," said Tyrion.

“The only puzzle is what you might have offered for his allegiance. The prince is a sentimental man, and he still mourns his sister Elia and her sweet babe.”

“My father once told me that a lord never lets sentiment get in the way of ambition... and it happens we have an empty seat on the small council, now that Lord Janos has taken the black.”

“A council seat is not to be despised,” Varys admitted, “yet will it be enough to make a proud man forget his sister’s murder?”

“Why forget?” Tyrion smiled. “I’ve promised to deliver his sister’s killers, alive or dead, as he prefers. *After* the war is done, to be sure.”

Varys gave him a shrewd look. “My little birds tell me that Princess Elia cried a... certain name... when they came for her.”

“Is a secret still a secret if everyone knows it?” In Casterly Rock, it was common knowledge that Gregor Clegane had killed Elia and her babe. They said he had raped the princess with her son’s blood and brains still on his hands.

“*This* secret is your lord father’s sworn man.”

“My father would be the first to tell you that fifty thousand Dornishmen are worth one rabid dog.”

Varys stroked a powdered cheek. “And if Prince Doran demands the blood of the lord who gave the command as well as the knight who did the deed...”

“Robert Baratheon led the rebellion. All commands came from him, in the end.”

“Robert was not at King’s Landing.”

“Neither was Doran Martell.”

“So. Blood for his pride, a chair for his ambition. Gold and land, that goes without saying. A sweet offer... yet sweets can be poisoned. If I were the prince, something more would I require before I should reach for this honeycomb. Some token of good faith, some sure safeguard against betrayal.” Varys smiled his slimiest smile. “Which one will you give him, I wonder?”

Tyrion sighed. “You know, don’t you?”

“Since you put it that way—yes. Tommen. You could scarcely offer Myrcella to Doran Martell and Lysa Arryn both.”

“Remind me never to play these guessing games with you again. You cheat. “

“Prince Tommen is a good boy.”

“If I pry him away from Cersei and Joffrey while he’s still young, he may even grow to be a good man.”

“And a good king?”

“Joffrey is king.”

“And Tommen is heir, should anything ill befall His Grace. Tommen, whose nature is so sweet, and notably... tractable.”

“You have a suspicious mind, Varys.”

“I shall take that as a tribute, my lord. In any case, Prince Doran will hardly be insensible of the great honor you do him. Very deftly done, I would say... but for one small flaw.”

The dwarf laughed. “Named Cersei?”

“What avails statecraft against the love of a mother for the sweet fruit of her womb? Perhaps, for the glory of her House and the safety of the realm, the queen might be persuaded to send away Tommen or Myrcella. But both of them? Surely not.”

“What Cersei does not know will never hurt me.”

“And if Her Grace were to discover your intentions before your plans are ripe?”

“Why,” he said, “then I would know the man who told her to be my certain enemy.” And when Varys giggled, he thought, *Three*.