

## TYRION

They had warned him to dress warmly. Tyrion Lannister took them at their word. He was garbed in heavy quilted breeches and a woolen doublet, and over it all he had thrown the shadowskin cloak he had acquired in the Mountains of the Moon. The cloak was absurdly long, made for a man twice his height. When he was not ahorse, the only way to wear the thing was to wrap it around him several times, which made him look like a ball of striped fur.

Even so, he was glad he had listened. The chill in the long dank vault went bone deep. Timett had chosen to retreat back up to the cellar after a brief taste of the cold below. They were somewhere under the hill of Rhaenys, behind the Guildhall of the Alchemists. The damp stone walls were splotchy with nitre, and the only light came from the sealed iron-and-glass oil lamp that Hallyne the Pyromancer carried so gingerly.

*Gingerly indeed... and these would be the ginger jars.* Tyrion lifted one for inspection. It was round and ruddy, a fat clay grapefruit. A little big for his hand, but it would fit comfortably in the grip of a normal man, he knew. The pottery was thin, so fragile that even he had been warned not to squeeze too tightly, lest he crush it in his fist. The clay felt roughened, pebbled. Hallyne told him that was intentional. “A smooth pot is more apt to slip from a man’s grasp.”

The wildfire oozed slowly toward the lip of the jar when Tyrion tilted it to peer inside. The color would be a murky green, he knew, but the poor light made that impossible to confirm. “Thick,” he observed.

“That is from the cold, my lord,” said Hallyne, a pallid man with soft damp hands and an obsequious manner. He was dressed in striped black-and-scarlet robes trimmed with sable, but the fur looked more than a little patchy and moth-eaten. “As it warms, the substance will flow more easily, like lamp oil.”

*The substance* was the pyromancers' own term for wildfire. They called each other *wisdom* as well, which Tyrion found almost as annoying as their custom of hinting at the vast secret stores of knowledge that they wanted him to think they possessed. Once theirs had been a powerful guild, but in recent centuries the maesters of the Citadel had supplanted the alchemists almost everywhere. Now only a few of the older order remained, and they no longer even pretended to transmute metals...

...but they *could* make wildfire. "Water will not quench it, I am told."

"That is so. Once it takes fire, the substance will burn fiercely until it is no more. More, it will seep into cloth, wood, leather, even steel, so they take fire as well."

Tyrion remembered the red priest Thoros of Myr and his flaming sword. Even a thin coating of wildfire could burn for an hour. Thoros always needed a new sword after a melee, but Robert had been fond of the man and ever glad to provide one. "Why doesn't it seep into the clay as well?"

"Oh, but it does," said Hallyne. "There is a vault below this one where we store the older pots. Those from King Aerys's day. It was his fancy to have the jars made in the shapes of fruits. Very perilous fruits indeed, my lord Hand, and, hmmm, *riper* now than ever, if you take my meaning. We have sealed them with wax and pumped the lower vault full of water, but even so... by rights they ought to have been destroyed, but so many of our masters were murdered during the Sack of King's Landing, the few acolytes who remained were unequal to the task. And much of the stock we made for Aerys was lost. Only last year, two hundred jars were discovered in a storeroom beneath the Great Sept of Baelor. No one could recall how they came there, but I'm sure I do not need to tell you that the High Septon was beside himself with terror. I myself saw that they were safely moved. I had a cart filled with sand, and sent our most able acolytes. We worked only by night, we—"

"—did a splendid job, I have no doubt." Tyrion placed the jar he'd been holding back among its fellows. They covered the table, standing in orderly rows of four and marching away into the subterranean dimness. And there

were other tables beyond, many other tables. “These, ah, fruits of the late King Aerys, can they still be used?”

“Oh, yes, most certainly... but *carefully*, my lord, ever so carefully. As it ages, the substance grows ever more, hmmm, *fickle*, let us say. Any flame will set it afire. Any spark. Too much heat and jars will blaze up of their own accord. It is not wise to let them sit in sunlight, even for a short time. Once the fire begins within, the heat causes the substance to expand violently, and the jars shortly fly to pieces. If other jars should happen to be stored in the same vicinity, those go up as well, and so—”

“How many jars do you have at present?”

“This morning the Wisdom Munciter told me that we had seven thousand eight hundred and forty. That count includes four thousand jars from King Aerys’s day, to be sure.”

“Our overripe fruits?”

Hallyne bobbed his head. “Wisdom Malliard believes we shall be able to provide a full ten thousand jars, as was promised the queen. I concur.” The pyromancer looked indecently pleased with that prospect.

*Assuming our enemies give you the time.* The pyromancers kept their recipe for wildfire a closely guarded secret, but Tyrion knew that it was a lengthy, dangerous, and time-consuming process. He had assumed the promise of ten thousand jars was a wild boast, like that of the bannerman who vows to marshal ten thousand swords for his lord and shows up on the day of battle with a hundred and two. *If they can truly give us ten thousand...*

He did not know whether he ought to be delighted or terrified. *Perhaps a smidge of both.* “I trust that your guild brothers are not engaging in any unseemly haste, Wisdom. We do not want ten thousand jars of defective wildfire, nor even one... and we most certainly do not want any mishaps.”

“There will be no mishaps, my lord Hand. The substance is prepared by trained acolytes in a series of bare stone cells, and each jar is removed by an apprentice and carried down here the instant it is ready. Above each work cell is a room filled entirely with sand. A protective spell has been laid on

the floors, hmmm, most powerful. Any fire in the cell below causes the floors to fall away, and the sand smothers the blaze at once.”

“Not to mention the careless acolyte.” By *spell* Tyrion imagined Hallyne meant *clever trick*. He thought he would like to inspect one of these false-ceilinged cells to see how it worked, but this was not the time. Perhaps when the war was won.

“My brethren are never careless,” Hallyne insisted. “If I may be, hmmm, *frank*...”

“Oh, do.”

“The substance flows through my veins, and lives in the heart of every pyromancer. We respect its power. But the common soldier, hmmm, the crew of one of the queen’s spitfires, say, in the unthinking frenzy of battle... any little mistake can bring catastrophe. That cannot be said too often. My father often told King Aerys as much, as *his* father told old King Jaehaerys.”

“They must have listened,” Tyrion said. “If they had burned the city down, someone would have told me. So your counsel is that we had best be careful?”

“Be *very* careful,” said Hallyne. “Be *very very* careful.”

“These clay jars... do you have an ample supply?”

“We do, my lord, and thank you for asking.”

“You won’t mind if I take some, then. A few thousand.”

“A few thousand?”

“Or however many your guild can spare, without interfering with production. It’s *empty* pots I’m asking for, understand. Have them sent round to the captains on each of the city gates.”

“I will, my lord, but why...?”

Tyrion smiled up at him. “When you tell me to dress warmly, I dress warmly. When you tell me to be careful, well...” He gave a shrug. “I’ve seen enough. Perhaps you would be so good as to escort me back up to my litter?”

“It would be my great, hmmm, pleasure, my lord.” Hallyne lifted the lamp and led the way back to the stairs. “It was good of you to visit us. A great honor, hmmm. It has been too long since the King’s Hand graced us with his presence. Not since Lord Rossart, and he was of our order. That was back in King Aerys’s day. King Aerys took a great interest in our work.”

*King Aerys used you to roast the flesh off his enemies.* His brother Jaime had told him a few stories of the Mad King and his pet pyromancers. “Joffrey will be interested as well, I have no doubt.” *Which is why I’d best keep him well away from you.*

“It is our great hope to have the king visit our Guildhall in his own royal person. I have spoken of it to your royal sister. A great feast...”

It was growing warmer as they climbed. “His Grace has prohibited all feasting until such time as the war is won.” *At my insistence.* “The king does not think it fitting to banquet on choice food while his people go without bread.”

“A most, hmmm, *loving* gesture, my lord. Perhaps instead some few of us might call upon the king at the Red Keep. A small demonstration of our powers, as it were, to distract His Grace from his many cares for an evening. Wildfire is but one of the dread secrets of our ancient order. Many and wondrous are the things we might show you.”

“I will take it up with my sister.” Tyrion had no objection to a few magic tricks, but Joff’s fondness for making men fight to the death was trial enough; he had no intention of allowing the boy to taste the possibilities of burning them alive.

When at last they reached the top of the steps, Tyrion shrugged out of his shadowskin fur and folded it over his arm. The Guildhall of the Alchemists was an imposing warren of black stone, but Hallyne led him through the twists and turns until they reached the Gallery of the Iron Torches, a long echoing chamber where columns of green fire danced around black metal columns twenty feet tall. Ghostly flames shimmered off the polished black marble of the walls and floor and bathed the hall in an emerald radiance. Tyrion would have been more impressed if he hadn’t

known that the great iron torches had only been lit this morning in honor of his visit, and would be extinguished the instant the doors closed behind him. Wildfire was too costly to squander.

They emerged atop the broad curving steps that fronted on the Street of the Sisters, near the foot of Visenya's Hill. He bid Hallyne farewell and waddled down to where Timett son of Timett waited with an escort of Burned Men. Given his purpose today, it had seemed a singularly appropriate choice for his guard. Besides, their scars struck terror in the hearts of the city rabble. That was all to the good these days. Only three nights past, another mob had gathered at the gates of the Red Keep, chanting for food. Joff had unleashed a storm of arrows against them, slaying four, and then shouted down that they had his leave to eat their dead. *Winning us still more friends.*

Tyrion was surprised to see Bronn standing beside the litter as well. "What are you doing here?"

"Delivering your messages," Bronn said. "Ironhand wants you urgently at the Gate of the Gods. He won't say why. And you've been summoned to Maegor's too."

"*Summoned?*" Tyrion knew of only one person who would presume to use that word. "And what does Cersei want of me?"

Bronn shrugged. "The queen commands you to return to the castle at once and attend her in her chambers. That stripling cousin of yours delivered the message. Four hairs on his lip and he thinks he's a man."

"Four hairs and a knighthood. He's *Ser* Lancel now, never forget." Tyrion knew that Ser Jacelyn would not send for him unless the matter was of import. "I'd best see what Bywater wants. Inform my sister that I will attend her on my return."

"She won't like that," Bronn warned.

"Good. The longer Cersei waits, the angrier she'll become, and anger makes her stupid. I much prefer angry and stupid to composed and cunning." Tyrion tossed his folded cloak into his litter, and Timett helped him up after it.

The market square inside the Gate of the Gods, which in normal times would have been thronged with farmers selling vegetables, was near deserted when Tyrion crossed it. Ser Jacelyn met him at the gate, and raised his iron hand in brusque salute. “My lord. Your cousin Cleos Frey is here, come from Riverrun under a peace banner with a letter from Robb Stark.”

“Peace terms?”

“So he says.”

“Sweet cousin. Show me to him.”

The gold cloaks had confined Ser Cleos to a windowless guardroom in the gatehouse. He rose when they entered. “Tyrion, you are a most welcome sight.”

“That’s not something I hear often, cousin.”

“Has Cersei come with you?”

“My sister is otherwise occupied. Is this Stark’s letter?” He plucked it off the table. “Ser Jacelyn, you may leave us.”

Bywater bowed and departed. “I was asked to bring the offer to the Queen Regent,” Ser Cleos said as the door shut.

“I shall.” Tyrion glanced over the map that Robb Stark had sent with his letter. “All in good time, cousin. Sit. Rest. You look gaunt and haggard.” He looked worse than that, in truth.

“Yes.” Ser Cleos lowered himself onto a bench. “It is bad in the riverlands, Tyrion. Around the Gods Eye and along the kingsroad especially. The river lords are burning their own crops to try and starve us, and your father’s foragers are torching every village they take and putting the smallfolk to the sword.”

That was the way of war. The smallfolk were slaughtered, while the highborn were held for ransom. *Remind me to thank the gods that I was bom a Lannister.*

Ser Cleos ran a hand through his thin brown hair. “Even with a peace banner, we were attacked twice. Wolves in mail, hungry to savage anyone weaker than themselves. The gods alone know what side they started on,

but they're on their own side now. Lost three men, and twice as many wounded."

"What news of our foe?" Tyrion turned his attention back to Stark's terms. *The boy does not want too much. Only half the realm, the release of our captives, hostages, his father's sword... oh, yes, and his sisters.*

"The boy sits idle at Riverrun," Ser Cleos said. "I think he fears to face your father in the field. His strength grows less each day. The river lords have departed, each to defend his own lands."

*Is this what Father intended?* Tyrion rolled up Stark's map. "These terms will never do."

"Will you at least consent to trade the Stark girls for Tion and Willem?" Ser Cleos asked plaintively.

Tion Frey was his younger brother, Tyrion recalled. "No," he said gently, "but we'll propose our own exchange of captives. Let me consult with Cersei and the council. We shall send you back to Riverrun with our terms."

Clearly, the prospect did not cheer him. "My lord, I do not believe Robb Stark will yield easily. It is Lady Catelyn who wants this peace, not the boy."

"Lady Catelyn wants her daughters." Tyrion pushed himself down from the bench, letter and map in hand. "Ser Jacelyn will see that you have food and fire. You look in dire need of sleep, cousin. I will send for you when we know more."

He found Ser Jacelyn on the ramparts, watching several hundred new recruits drilling in the field below. With so many seeking refuge in King's Landing, there was no lack of men willing to join the City Watch for a full belly and a bed of straw in the barracks, but Tyrion had no illusions about how well these ragged defenders of theirs would fight if it came to battle.

"You did well to send for me," Tyrion said. "I shall leave Ser Cleos in your hands. He is to have every hospitality."

"And his escort?" the commander wanted to know.



“Give them food and clean garb, and find a maester to see to their hurts. They are not to set foot inside the city, is that understood?” It would never do to have the truth of conditions in King’s Landing reach Robb Stark in Riverrun.

“Well understood, my lord.”

“Oh, and one more thing. The alchemists will be sending a large supply of clay pots to each of the city gates. You’re to use them to train the men who will work your spitfires. Fill the pots with green paint and have them drill at loading and firing. Any man who spatters should be replaced. When they have mastered the paint pots, substitute lamp oil and have them work at lighting the jars and firing them while aflame. Once they learn to do that without burning themselves, they may be ready for wildfire.”

Ser Jacelyn scratched at his cheek with his iron hand. “Wise measures. Though I have no love for that alchemist’s piss.”

“Nor I, but I use what I’m given.”

Once back inside his litter, Tyrion Lannister drew the curtains and plumped a cushion under his elbow. Cersei would be displeased to learn that he had intercepted Stark’s letter, but his father had sent him here to rule, not to please Cersei.

It seemed to him that Robb Stark had given them a golden chance. Let the boy wait at Riverrun dreaming of an easy peace. Tyrion would reply with terms of his own, giving the King in the North just enough of what he wanted to keep him hopeful. Let Ser Cleos wear out his bony Frey rump riding to and fro with offers and counters. All the while, their cousin Ser Stafford would be training and arming the new host he’d raised at Casterly Rock. Once he was ready, he and Lord Tywin could smash the Tullys and Starks between them.

*Now if only Robert’s brothers would be so accommodating.* Glacial as his progress was, still Renly Baratheon crept north and east with his huge southron host, and scarcely a night passed that Tyrion did not dread being awakened with the news that Lord Stannis was sailing his fleet up the Blackwater Rush. *Well, it would seem I have a goodly stock of wildfire, but still...*

The sound of some hubbub in the street intruded on his worries. Tyrion peered out cautiously between the curtains. They were passing through Cobbler's Square, where a sizable crowd had gathered beneath the leather awnings to listen to the rantings of a prophet. A robe of undyed wool belted with a hempen rope marked him for one of the begging brothers.

"*Corruption!*" the man cried shrilly. "There is the warning! Behold the Father's scourge!" He pointed at the fuzzy red wound in the sky. From this vantage, the distant castle on Aegon's High Hill was directly behind him, with the comet hanging forebodingly over its towers. *A clever choice of stage*, Tyrion reflected. "We have become swollen, bloated, foul. Brother couples with sister in the bed of kings, and the fruit of their incest capers in his palace to the piping of a twisted little monkey demon. Highborn ladies fornicate with fools and give birth to monsters! Even the High Septon has forgotten the gods! He bathes in scented waters and grows fat on lark and lamprey while his people starve! Pride comes before prayer, maggots rule our castles, and gold is all... but *no more!* The Rotten Summer is at an end, and the Whoremonger King is brought low! When the boar did open him, a great stench rose to heaven and a thousand snakes slid forth from his belly, hissing and biting!" He jabbed his bony finger back at comet and castle. "There comes the Harbinger! Cleanse yourselves, the gods cry out, lest ye be cleansed! Bathe in the wine of righteousness, or you shall be bathed in fire! *Fire!*"

"*Fire!*" other voices echoed, but the hoots of derision almost drowned them out. Tyrion took solace from that. He gave the command to continue, and the litter rocked like a ship on a rough sea as the Burned Men cleared a path. *Twisted little monkey demon indeed.* The wretch did have a point about the High Septon, to be sure. What was it that Moon Boy had said of him the other day? *A pious man who worships the Seven so fervently that he eats a meal for each of them whenever he sits to table.* The memory of the fool's jape made Tyrion smile.

He was pleased to reach the Red Keep without further incident. As he climbed the steps to his chambers, Tyrion felt a deal more hopeful than he

had at dawn. *Time, that's all I truly need, time to piece it all together. Once the chain is done...* He opened the door to his solar.

Cersei turned away from the window, her skirts swirling around her slender hips. "How *dare* you ignore my summons!"

"Who admitted you to my tower?"

"*Your* tower? This is my son's royal castle."

"So they tell me." Tyrion was not amused. Crawn would be even less so; his Moon Brothers had the guard today. "I was about to come to you, as it happens."

"Were you?"

He swung the door shut behind him. "You doubt me?"

"Always, and with good reason."

"I'm hurt." Tyrion waddled to the sideboard for a cup of wine. He knew no surer way to work up a thirst than talking with Cersei. "If I've given you offense, I would know how."

"What a disgusting little worm you are. Myrcella is my only daughter. Did you truly imagine that I would allow you to sell her like a bag of oats?"

*Myrcella*, he thought. *Well, that egg has hatched. Let's see what color the chick is.* "Hardly a bag of oats. Myrcella is a princess. Some would say this is what she was born for. Or did you plan to marry her to Tommen?"

Her hand lashed out, knocking the wine cup from his hand to spill on the floor. "Brother or no, I should have your tongue out for that. *I* am Joffrey's regent, not you, and I say that Myrcella will not be shipped off to this Dornishman the way I was shipped to Robert Baratheon."

Tyrion shook wine off his fingers and sighed. "Why not? She'd be a deal safer in Dorne than she is here."

"Are you utterly ignorant or simply perverse? You know as well as I that the Martells have no cause to love us."

"The Martells have every cause to hate us. Nonetheless, I expect them to agree. Prince Doran's grievance against House Lannister goes back only

a generation, but the Dornishmen have warred against Storm's End and Highgarden for a thousand years, and Renly has taken Dorne's allegiance for granted. Myrcella is nine, Trystane Martell eleven. I have proposed they wed when she reaches her fourteenth year. Until such time, she would be an honored guest at Sunspear, under Prince Doran's protection."

"A hostage," Cersei said, mouth tightening.

"An honored guest," Tyrion insisted, "and I suspect Martell will treat Myrcella more kindly than Joffrey has treated Sansa Stark. I had in mind to send Ser Arys Oakheart with her. With a knight of the Kingsguard as her sworn shield, no one is like to forget who or what she is."

"Small good Ser Arys will do her if Doran Martell decides that my daughter's death would wash out his sister's."

"Martell is too honorable to murder a nine-year-old girl, particularly one as sweet and innocent as Myrcella. So long as he holds her he can be reasonably certain that we'll keep faith on our side, and the terms are too rich to refuse. Myrcella is the least part of it. I've also offered him his sister's killer, a council seat, some castles on the Marches..."

"Too much." Cersei paced away from him, restless as a lioness, skirts swirling. "You've offered too much, and without my authority or consent."

"This is the Prince of Dorne we are speaking of. If I'd offered less, he'd likely spit in my face."

"*Too much!*" Cersei insisted, whirling back.

"What would *you* have offered him, that hole between your legs?" Tyrion said, his own anger flaring.

This time he saw the slap coming. His head snapped around with a *crack*. "Sweet sweet sister," he said, "I promise you, that was the last time you will ever strike me."

His sister laughed. "Don't threaten me, little man. Do you think Father's letter keeps you safe? A piece of paper. Eddard Stark had a piece of paper too, for all the good it did him."

*Eddard Stark did not have the City Watch, Tyrion thought, nor my clansmen, nor the sellswords that Bronn has hired. I do.* Or so he hoped.

Trusting in Varys, in Ser Jacelyn Bywater, in Bronn. Lord Stark had probably had his delusions as well.

Yet he said nothing. A wise man did not pour wildfire on a brazier. Instead he poured a fresh cup of wine. “How safe do you think Myrcella will be if King’s Landing falls? Renly and Stannis will mount her head beside yours.”

And Cersei began to cry.

Tyrion Lannister could not have been more astonished if Aegon the Conqueror himself had burst into the room, riding on a dragon and juggling lemon pies. He had not seen his sister weep since they were children together at Casterly Rock. Awkwardly, he took a step toward her. When your sister cries, you were supposed to comfort her... but this was *Cersei*! He reached a tentative hand for her shoulder.

“Don’t *touch* me,” she said, wrenching away. It should not have hurt, yet it did, more than any slap. Red-faced, as angry as she was grief-stricken, Cersei struggled for breath. “Don’t look at me, not... not like this... not *you*.”

Politely, Tyrion turned his back. “I did not mean to frighten you. I promise you, nothing will happen to Myrcella.”

“Liar,” she said behind him. “I’m not a child, to be soothed with empty promises. You told me you would free Jaime too. Well, where is he?”

“In Riverrun, I should imagine. Safe and under guard, until I find a way to free him.”

Cersei sniffed. “I should have been born a man. I would have no need of any of you then. None of this would have been allowed to happen. How could Jaime let himself be captured by that *boy*? And Father, I trusted in him, fool that I am, but where is he now that he’s wanted? What is he *doing*?”

“Making war.”

“From behind the walls of Harrenhal?” she said scornfully. “A curious way of fighting. It looks suspiciously like hiding.”

“Look again.”

“What else would you call it? Father sits in one castle, and Robb Stark sits in another, and no one does anything.”

“There is sitting and there is sitting,” Tyrion suggested. “Each one waits for the other to move, but the lion is still, poised, his tail twitching, while the fawn is frozen by fear, bowels turned to jelly. No matter which way he bounds, the lion will have him, and he knows it.”

“And you’re *quite* certain that Father is the lion?”

Tyrion grinned. “It’s on all our banners.”

She ignored the jest. “If it was Father who’d been taken captive, Jaime would not be sitting by idly, I promise you.”

*Jaime would be battering his host to bloody bits against the walls of Riverrun, and the Others take their chances. He never did have any patience, no more than you, sweet sister.* “Not all of us can be as bold as Jaime, but there are other ways to win wars. Harrenhal is strong and well situated.”

“And King’s Landing is *not*, as we both know perfectly well. While Father plays lion and fawn with the Stark boy, Renly marches up the roseroad. He could be at our gates any day now!”

“The city will not fall in a day. From Harrenhal it is a straight, swift march down the kingsroad. Renly will scarce have unlimbered his siege engines before Father takes him in the rear. His host will be the hammer, the city walls the anvil. it makes a lovely picture.”

Cersei’s green eyes bored into him, wary, yet hungry for the reassurance he was feeding her. “And if Robb Stark marches?”

“Harrenhal is close enough to the fords of the Trident so that Roose Bolton cannot bring the northern foot across to join with the Young Wolf’s horse. Stark cannot march on King’s Landing without taking Harrenhal first, and even with Bolton he is not strong enough to do that.” Tyrion tried his most winning smile. “Meanwhile Father lives off the fat of the riverlands, while our uncle Stafford gathers fresh levies at the Rock.”

Cersei regarded him suspiciously. “How could you know all this? Did Father tell you his intentions when he sent you here?”

“No. I glanced at a map.”

Her look turned to disdain. “You’ve conjured up every word of this in that grotesque head of yours, haven’t you, Imp?”

Tyrion *tsked*. “Sweet sister, I ask you, if we weren’t winning, would the Starks have sued for peace?” He drew out the letter that Ser Cleos Frey had brought. “The Young Wolf has sent us terms, you see. Unacceptable terms, to be sure, but still, a beginning. Would you care to see them?”

“Yes.” That fast, she was all queen again. “How do you come to have them? They should have come to me.”

“What else is a Hand for, if not to hand you things?” Tyrion handed her the letter. His cheek still throbbed where Cersei’s hand had left its mark. *Let her flay half my face, it will be a small price to pay for her consent to the Dornish marriage.* He would have that now, he could sense it.

*And* certain knowledge of an informer too... well, that was the plum in his pudding.