

# TYRION

He woke alone, and found the litter halted.

A pile of crushed cushions remained to show where Illyrio had sprawled. The dwarf's throat felt dry and raspy. He had dreamed ... what had he dreamed? He did not remember.

Outside, voices were speaking in a tongue he did not know. Tyrion swung his legs through the curtains and hopped to the ground, to find Magister Illyrio standing by the horses with two riders looming over him. Both wore shirts of worn leather beneath cloaks of dark brown wool, but their swords were sheathed and the fat man did not look to be in danger.

"I need a piss," the dwarf announced. He waddled off the road, undid his breeches, and relieved himself into a tangle of thorns. It took quite a long time.

"He pisses well, at least," a voice observed.

Tyrion flicked the last drops off and tucked himself away. "Pissing is the least of my talents. You ought to see me shit." He turned to Magister Illyrio. "Are these two known to you, magister? They look like outlaws. Should I find my axe?"

"Your *axe*?" exclaimed the larger of the riders, a brawny man with a shaggy beard and a shock of orange hair. "Did you hear that, Haldon? The little man wants to fight with us!"

His companion was older, clean-shaved, with a lined ascetic face. His hair had been pulled back and tied in a knot behind his head. "Small men oft feel a need to prove their courage with unseemly boasts," he declared. "I doubt if he could kill a duck."

Tyrion shrugged. "Fetch the duck."

"If you insist." The rider glanced at his companion.

The brawny man unsheathed a bastard sword. "I'm Duck, you mouthy little pisspot."

*Oh, gods be good.* "I had a smaller duck in mind."

The big man roared with laughter. "Did you hear, Haldon? He wants a *smaller* Duck!"

"I should gladly settle for a quieter one." The man called Haldon studied Tyrion with cool grey eyes before turning back to Illyrio. "You have some chests for us?"

"And mules to carry them."

"Mules are too slow. We have pack horses, we'll shift the chests to them. Duck, attend to that."

"Why is it always Duck who attends to things?" The big man slipped his sword back in its sheath. "What do *you* attend to, Haldon? Who is the knight here, you or me?" Yet he stomped off toward the baggage mules all the same.

"How fares our lad?" asked Illyrio as the chests were being secured. Tyrion counted six, oaken chests with iron hasps. Duck shifted them easily enough, hoisting them on one shoulder.

"He is as tall as Griff now. Three days ago he knocked Duck into a horse trough."

"I wasn't *knocked*. I fell in just to make him laugh."

"Your ploy was a success," said Haldon. "I laughed myself."

"There is a gift for the boy in one of the chests. Some candied ginger. He was always fond of it." Illyrio sounded oddly sad. "I thought I might continue on to Ghoyan Drohe with you. A farewell feast before you start downriver ..."

“We have no time for feasts, my lord,” said Haldon. “Griff means to strike downriver the instant we are back. News has been coming upriver, none of it good. Dothraki have been seen north of Dagger Lake, outriders from old Motho’s *khalasar*, and Khal Zekko is not far behind him, moving through the Forest of Qohor.”

The fat man made a rude noise. “Zekko visits Qohor every three or four years. The Qohorik give him a sack of gold and he turns east again. As for Motho, his men are near as old as he is, and there are fewer every year. The threat is—”

“—Khal Pono,” Haldon finished. “Motho and Zekko flee from him, if the tales are true. The last reports had Pono near the headwaters of the Selhoru with a *khalasar* of thirty thousand. Griff does not want to risk being caught up in the crossing if Pono should decide to risk the Rhoyme.” Haldon glanced at Tyrion. “Does your dwarf ride as well as he pisses?”

“He rides,” Tyrion broke in, before the lord of cheese could answer for him, “though he rides best with a special saddle and a horse that he knows well. He talks as well.”

“So he does. I am Haldon, the healer in our little band of brothers. Some call me Halfmaester. My companion is Ser Duck.”

“Ser *Rolly*,” said the big man. “Rolly Duckfield. Any knight can make a knight, and Griff made me. And you, dwarf?”

Illyrio spoke up quickly. “Yollo, he is called.”

*Yollo? Yollo sounds like something you might name a monkey.* Worse, it was a Pentoshi name, and any fool could see that Tyrion was no Pentoshi. “In Pentos I am Yollo,” he said quickly, to make what amends he could, “but my mother named me Hugor Hill.”

“Are you a little king or a little bastard?” asked Haldon.

Tyrion realized he would do well to be careful around Haldon Half-maester. “Every dwarf is a bastard in his father’s eyes.”

“No doubt. Well, Hugor Hill, answer me this. How did Serwyn of the Mirror Shield slay the dragon Urrax?”

“He approached behind his shield. Urrax saw only his own reflection until Serwyn had plunged his spear through his eye.”

Haldon was unimpressed. “Even Duck knows that tale. Can you tell me the name of the knight who tried the same ploy with Vhagar during the Dance of the Dragons?”

Tyrion grinned. “Ser Byron Swann. He was roasted for his trouble ... only the dragon was Syrax, not Vhagar.”

“I fear that you’re mistaken. In *The Dance of the Dragons, A True Telling*, Maester Munkun writes—”

“—that it was Vhagar. *Grand* Maester Munkun errs. Ser Byron’s squire saw his master die, and wrote his daughter of the manner of it. His account says it was Syrax, Rhaenyra’s she-dragon, which makes more sense than Munkun’s version. Swann was the son of a marcher lord, and Storm’s End was for Aegon. Vhagar was ridden by Prince Aemond, Aegon’s brother. Why should Swann want to slay her?”

Haldon pursed his lips. “Try not to tumble off the horse. If you do, best waddle back to Pentos. Our shy maid will not wait for man nor dwarf.”

“Shy maids are my favorite sort. Aside from wanton ones. Tell me, where do whores go?”

“Do I look like a man who frequents whores?”

Duck laughed derisively. “He don’t dare. Lemoire would make him pray for pardon, the lad would want to come along, and Griff might cut his cock off and stuff it down his throat.”

“Well,” said Tyrion, “a maester does not need a cock.”

“Haldon’s only half a maester, though.”

“You seem to find the dwarf amusing, Duck,” said Haldon. “He can ride with you.” He wheeled his mount about.

It took another few moments for Duck to finish securing Illyrio’s chests to the three pack horses. By that time Haldon had vanished. Duck seemed unconcerned. He swung into the saddle, grabbed Tyrion by the collar, and hoisted the little man up in front of him. “Hold tight to the pommel and you’ll do fine. The mare’s got a nice sweet gait, and the dragon road’s smooth as a maiden’s arse.” Gathering the reins in his right hand and the leads in his left, Ser Rolly set off at a brisk trot.

“Good fortune,” Illyrio called after them. “Tell the boy I am sorry that I will not be with him for his wedding. I will rejoin you in Westeros. That I swear, by my sweet Serra’s hands.”

The last that Tyrion Lannister saw of Illyrio Mopatis, the magister was standing by his litter in his brocade robes, his massive shoulders slumped. As his figure dwindled in their dust, the lord of cheese looked almost small.

Duck caught up with Haldon Halfmaester a quarter mile on. Thereafter the riders continued side by side. Tyrion clung to the high pommel with his short legs splayed out awkwardly, knowing he could look forward to blisters, cramps, and saddle sores.

“I wonder what the pirates of Dagger Lake will make of our dwarf?” Haldon said as they rode on.

“Dwarf stew?” suggested Duck. “Urho the Unwashed is the worst of them,” Haldon confided. “His stench alone is enough to kill a man.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Fortunately, I have no nose.”

Haldon gave him a thin smile. “If we should encounter the Lady Korra on *Hag’s Teeth*, you may soon be lacking other parts as well. Korra the Cruel, they call her. Her ship is crewed by beautiful young maids who geld every male they capture.”

“Terrifying. I may well piss my breeches.”

“Best not,” Duck warned darkly. “As you say. If we encounter this Lady Korra, I will just slip into a skirt and say that I am Cersei, the famous bearded beauty of King’s Landing.”

This time Duck laughed, and Haldon said, “What a droll little fellow you are, Yollo. They say that the Shrouded Lord will grant a boon to any man who can make him laugh. Perhaps His Grey Grace will choose you to ornament his stony court.”

Duck glanced at his companion uneasily. “It’s not good to jape of that one, not when we’re so near the Rhoyme. He hears.”

“Wisdom from a duck,” said Haldon. “I beg your pardon, Yollo. You need not look so pale, I was only playing with you. The Prince of Sorrows does not bestow his grey kiss lightly.”

*His grey kiss.* The thought made his flesh crawl. Death had lost its terror for Tyrion Lannister, but greyscale was another matter. *The Shrouded Lord is just a legend, he told himself, no more real than the ghost of Lann the Clever that some claim haunts Casterly Rock.* Even so, he held his tongue.

The dwarf’s sudden silence went unnoticed, as Duck had begun to regale him with his own life story. His father had been an armorer at Bitterbridge, he said, so he had been born with the sound of steel ringing in his ears and had taken to swordplay at an early age. Such a large and likely lad drew the eye of old Lord Caswell, who offered him a place in his garrison, but the boy had wanted more. He watched Caswell’s weakling son named a page, a squire, and finally a knight. “A weedy pinch-faced sneak, he was, but the old lord had four daughters and only the one son, so no one was allowed to say a word against him. T’other squires hardly dared to lay a finger on him in the yard.”

“You were not so timid, though.” Tyrion could see where this tale was going easily enough.

“My father made a longsword for me to mark my sixteenth nameday,” said Duck, “but Lorent liked the look of it so much he took it for himself, and my bloody father never dared to tell him no. When I complained, Lorent

told me to my face that my hand was made to hold a hammer, not a sword. So I went and got a hammer and beat him with it, till both his arms and half his ribs were broken. After that I had to leave the Reach, quick as it were. I made it across the water to the Golden Company. I did some smithing for a few years as a 'prentice, then Ser Harry Strickland took me on as squire. When Griff sent word downriver that he needed someone to help train his son to arms, Harry sent him me."

"And Griff knighted you?"

"A year later."

Haldon Halfmaester smiled a thin smile. "Tell our little friend how you came by your name, why don't you?"

"A knight needs more than just the one name," the big man insisted,

"and, well, we were in a field when he dubbed me, and I looked up and saw these ducks, so ... don't laugh, now."

Just after sunset, they left the road to rest in an overgrown yard beside an old stone well. Tyrion hopped down to work the cramps out of his calves whilst Duck and Haldon were watering the horses. Tough brown grass and weed trees sprouted from the gaps between the cobbles, and the mossy walls of what once might have been a huge stone manse. After the animals had been tended to, the riders shared a simple supper of salt pork and cold white beans, washed down with ale. Tyrion found the plain fare a pleasant change from all the rich food he had eaten with Illyrio. "Those chests we brought you," he said as they were chewing. "Gold for the Golden Company, I thought at first, until I saw Ser Rolly hoist a chest onto one shoulder. If it were full of coin, he could never have lifted it so easily."

"It's just armor," said Duck, with a shrug. "Clothing as well," Haldon broke in. "Court clothes, for all our party. Fine woolens, velvets, silken cloaks. One does not come before a queen looking shabby ... nor empty-handed. The magister has been kind enough to provide us with suitable gifts."

Come moonrise, they were back in their saddles, trotting eastward under a mantle of stars. The old Valyrian road glimmered ahead of them like a long silver ribbon winding through wood and dale. For a little while Tyrion Lannister felt almost at peace. “Lomas Longstrider told it true. The road’s a wonder.”

“Lomas Longstrider?” asked Duck. “A scribe, long dead,” said Haldon. “He spent his life traveling the world and writing about the lands he visited in two books he called *Wonders* and *Wonders Made by Man*.”

“An uncle of mine gave them to me when I was just a boy,” said Tyrion. “I read them until they fell to pieces.”

“*The gods made seven wonders, and mortal man made nine*,” quoted the Halfmaester. “Rather impious of mortal man to do the gods two better, but there you are. The stone roads of Valyria were one of Longstrider’s nine. The fifth, I believe.”

“The fourth,” said Tyrion, who had committed all sixteen of the wonders to memory as a boy. His uncle Gerion liked to set him on the table during feasts and make him recite them. *I liked that well enough, didn’t I? Standing there amongst the trenchers with every eye upon me, proving what a clever little imp I was.* For years afterward, he had cherished a dream that one day he would travel the world and see Longstrider’s wonders for himself.

Lord Tywin had put an end to that hope ten days before his dwarf son’s sixteenth nameday, when Tyrion asked to tour the Nine Free Cities, as his uncles had done at that same age. “My brothers could be relied upon to bring no shame upon House Lannister,” his father had replied. “Neither ever wed a whore.” And when Tyrion had reminded him that in ten days he would be a man grown, free to travel where he wished, Lord Tywin had said, “No man is free. Only children and fools think otherwise. Go, by all means. Wear motley and stand upon your head to amuse the spice lords and the cheese kings. Just see that you pay your own way and put aside any thoughts of returning.” At that the boy’s defiance had crumbled. “If it is useful occupation you require, useful occupation you shall have,” his father then said. So to mark his manhood, Tyrion was given charge of all the drains and cisterns within Casterly Rock. *Perhaps he hoped I’d fall into*



one. But Tywin had been disappointed in that. The drains never drained half so well as when he had charge of them.

*I need a cup of wine, to wash the taste of Tywin from my mouth. A skin of wine would serve me even better.*

They rode all night, with Tyrion sleeping fitfully, dozing against the pommel and waking suddenly. From time to time he would begin to slip sideways from the saddle, but Ser Rolly would get a hand on him and yank him upright once again. By dawn the dwarf's legs were aching and his cheeks were chafed and raw.

It was the next day before they reached the site of Ghoyan Drohe, hard beside the river. "The fabled Rhoyme," said Tyrion when he glimpsed the slow green waterway from atop a rise.

"The Little Rhoyme," said Duck.

"It is that." *A pleasant enough river, I suppose, but the smallest fork of the Trident is twice as wide, and all three of them run swifter.* The city was no more impressive. Ghoyan Drohe had never been large, Tyrion recalled from his histories, but it had been a fair place, green and flowering, a city of canals and fountains. *Until the war. Until the dragons came.* A thousand years later, the canals were choked with reeds and mud, and pools of stagnant water gave birth to swarms of flies. The broken stones of temples and palaces were sinking back into the earth, and gnarled old willows grew thick along the riverbanks.

A few people still remained amidst the squalor, tending little gardens in amongst the weeds. The sound of iron hooves ringing on the old Valyrian road sent most of them darting back into the holes they'd crawled from, but the bolder ones lingered in the sun long enough to stare at the passing riders with dull, incurious eyes. One naked girl with mud up to her knees could not seem to take her eyes off Tyrion. *She has never seen a dwarf before,* he realized, *much less a dwarf without a nose.* He made a face and stuck his tongue out, and the girl began to cry.

"What did you do to her?" Duck asked.

“I blew her a kiss. All the girls cry when I kiss them.”

Beyond the tangled willows the road ended abruptly and they turned north for a short ways and rode beside the water, until the brush gave way and they found themselves beside an old stone quay, half-submerged and surrounded by tall brown weeds. “*Duck!*” came a shout. “*Haldon!*” Tyrion craned his head to one side, and saw a boy standing on the roof of a low wooden building, waving a wide-brimmed straw hat. He was a lithe and well-made youth, with a lanky build and a shock of dark blue hair. The dwarf put his age at fifteen, sixteen, or near enough to make no matter.

The roof the boy was standing on turned out to be the cabin of the *Shy Maid*, an old ramshackle single-masted poleboat. She had a broad beam and a shallow draft, ideal for making her way up the smallest of streams and crabwalking over sandbars. *A homely maid*, thought Tyrion, *but sometimes the ugliest ones are the hungriest once abed*. The poleboats that plied the rivers of Dorne were often brightly painted and exquisitely carved, but not this maid. Her paintwork was a muddy greyish brown, mottled and flaking; her big curved tiller, plain and unadorned. *She looks like dirt*, he thought, *but no doubt that’s the point*.

Duck was hallooing back by then. The mare splashed through the shallows, trampling down the reeds. The boy leapt down off the cabin roof to the poleboat’s deck, and the rest of the *Shy Maid*’s crew made their appearance. An older couple with a Rhoynish cast to their features stood close beside the tiller, whilst a handsome septa in a soft white robe stepped through the cabin door and pushed a lock of dark brown hair from her eyes.

But there was no mistaking Griff. “That will be enough shouting,” he said. A sudden silence fell upon the river.

*This one will be trouble*, Tyrion knew at once.

Griff’s cloak was made from the hide and head of a red wolf of the Rhoyme. Under the pelt he wore brown leather stiffened with iron rings. His clean-shaved face was leathery too, with wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Though his hair was as blue as his son’s, he had red roots and redder eyebrows. At his hip hung a sword and dagger. If he was happy to have

Duck and Haldon back again, he hid it well, but he did not trouble to conceal his displeasure at the sight of Tyrion. “A dwarf? What’s this?”

“I know, you were hoping for a wheel of cheese.” Tyrion turned to Young Griff and gave the lad his most disarming smile. “Blue hair may serve you well in Tyrosh, but in Westeros children will throw stones at you and girls will laugh in your face.”

The lad was taken aback. “My mother was a lady of Tyrosh. I dye my hair in memory of her.”

“What is this creature?” Griff demanded.

Haldon answered. “Illyrio sent a letter to explain.”

“I will have it, then. Take the dwarf to my cabin.”

*I do not like his eyes*, Tyrion reflected, when the sellsword sat down across from him in the dimness of the boat’s interior, with a scarred plank table and a tallow candle between them. They were ice blue, pale, cold. The dwarf disliked pale eyes. Lord Tywin’s eyes had been pale green and flecked with gold.

He watched the sellsword read. That he *could* read said something all by itself. How many sellswords could boast of that? *He hardly moves his lips at all*, Tyrion reflected.

Finally Griff looked up from the parchment, and those pale eyes narrowed. “Tywin Lannister dead? At *your* hand?”

“At my finger. This one.” Tyrion held it up for Griff to admire. “Lord Tywin was sitting on a privy, so I put a crossbow bolt through his bowels to see if he really did shit gold. He didn’t. A pity, I could have used some gold. I also slew my mother, somewhat earlier. Oh, and my nephew Joffrey, I poisoned him at his wedding feast and watched him choke to death. Did the cheesemonger leave that part out? I mean to add my brother and sister to the list before I’m done, if it please your queen.”

“*Please* her? Has Illyrio taken leave of his senses? Why does he imagine that Her Grace would welcome the service of a self-confessed kingslayer and betrayer?”

*A fair question*, thought Tyrion, but what he said was, “The king I slew was sitting on her throne, and all those I betrayed were lions, so it seems to me that I have already done the queen good service.” He scratched the stump of his nose. “Have no fear, I won’t kill you, you are no kin of mine. Might I see what the cheesemonger wrote? I do love to read about myself.”

Griff ignored the request. Instead he touched the letter to the candle flame and watched the parchment blacken, curl, and flare up. “There is blood between Targaryen and Lannister. Why would you support the cause of Queen Daenerys?”

“For gold and glory,” the dwarf said cheerfully. “Oh, and hate. If you had ever met my sister, you would understand.”

“I understand hate well enough.” From the way Griff said the word, Tyrion knew that much was true. *He has supped on hate himself, this one. It has warmed him in the night for years.*

“Then we have that in common, ser.”

“I am no knight.”

*Not only a liar, but a bad one. That was clumsy and stupid, my lord.* “And yet Ser Duck says you knighted him.”

“Duck talks too much.”

“Some might wonder that a duck can talk at all. No matter, *Griff*. You are no knight and I am Hugor Hill, a little monster. *Your* little monster, if you like. You have my word, all that I desire is to be leal servant of your dragon queen.”

“And how do you propose to serve her?”

“With my tongue.” He licked his fingers, one by one. “I can tell Her Grace how my sweet sister thinks, if you call it thinking. I can tell her captains the best way to defeat my brother, Jaime, in battle. I know which lords are brave and which are craven, which are loyal and which are venal. I can deliver allies to her. And I know much and more of dragons, as your halfmaester will tell you. I’m amusing too, and I don’t eat much. Consider me your own true imp.”

Griff weighed that for a moment. “Understand this, dwarf. You are the last and least of our company. Hold your tongue and do as you are told, or you will soon wish you had.”

*Yes, Father,* Tyrion almost said. “As you say, my lord.”

“I am no lord.”

*Liar.* “It was a courtesy, my friend.”

“I am not your friend either.”

*No knight, no lord, no friend.* “A pity.”

“Spare me your irony. I will take you as far as Volantis. If you show yourself to be obedient and useful, you may remain with us, to serve the queen as best you can. Prove yourself more trouble than you are worth, and you can go your own way.”

*Aye, and my way will take me to the bottom of the Rhoyme with fish nibbling at what’s left of my nose.* “Valar dohaeris.”

“You may sleep on the deck or in the hold, as you prefer. Ysilla will find bedding for you.”

“How kind of her.” Tyrion made a waddling bow, but at the cabin door, he turned back. “What if we should find the queen and discover that this talk of dragons was just some sailor’s drunken fancy? This wide world is full of such mad tales. Grumkins and snarks, ghosts and ghouls, mermaids, rock goblins, winged horses, winged pigs ... winged lions.”

Griff stared at him, frowning. “I have given you fair warning, Lannister. Guard your tongue or lose it. Kingdoms are at hazard here. Our lives, our names, our honor. This is no game we’re playing for your amusement.”

*Of course it is*, thought Tyrion. *The game of thrones*. “As you say, Captain,” he murmured, bowing once again.