

TYRION

In the chilly white raiment of the Kingsguard, Ser Mandon Moore looked like a corpse in a shroud. “Her Grace left orders, the council in session is not to be disturbed.”

“I would be only a small disturbance, ser.” Tyrion slid the parchment from his sleeve. “I bear a letter from my father, Lord Tywin Lannister, the Hand of the King. There is his seal.”

“Her Grace does not wish to be disturbed,” Ser Mandon repeated slowly, as if Tyrion were a dullard who had not heard him the first time.

Jaime had once told him that Moore was the most dangerous of the Kingsguard—excepting himself, always—because his face gave no hint as what he might do next. Tyrion would have welcomed a hint. Bronn and Timett could likely kill the knight if it came to swords, but it would scarcely bode well if he began by slaying one of Joffrey’s protectors. Yet if he let the man turn him away, where was his authority? He made himself smile. “Ser Mandon, you have not met my companions. This is Timett son of Timett, a red hand of the Burned Men. And this is Bronn. Perchance you recall Ser Vardis Egen, who was captain of Lord Arryn’s household guard?”

“I know the man.” Ser Mandon’s eyes were pale grey, oddly flat and lifeless.

“Knew,” Bronn corrected with a thin smile.

Ser Mandon did not deign to show that he had heard that.

“Be that as it may,” Tyrion said lightly, “I truly must see my sister and present my letter, ser. If you would be so kind as to open the door for us?”

The white knight did not respond. Tyrion was almost at the point of trying to force his way past when Ser Mandon abruptly stood aside. “You may enter. They may not.”

A small victory, he thought, but sweet. He had passed his first test. Tyrion Lannister shouldered through the door, feeling almost tall. Five members of the king’s small council broke off their discussion suddenly.

“You,” his sister Cersei said in a tone that was equal parts disbelief and distaste.

“I can see where Joffrey learned his courtesies.” Tyrion paused to admire the pair of Valyrian sphinxes that guarded the door, affecting an air of casual confidence. Cersei could smell weakness the way a dog smells fear.

“What are you doing here?” His sister’s lovely green eyes studied him without the least hint of affection.

“Delivering a letter from our lord father.” He sauntered to the table and placed the tightly rolled parchment between them.

The eunuch Varys took the letter and turned it in his delicate powdered hands. “How kind of Lord Tywin. And his scaling wax is such a lovely shade of gold.” Varys gave the seal a close inspection. “It gives every appearance of being genuine.”

“Of course it’s genuine.” Cersei snatched it out of his hands. She broke the wax and unrolled the parchment.

Tyrion watched her read. His sister had taken the king’s seat for herself—he gathered Joffrey did not often trouble to attend council meetings, no more than Robert had—so Tyrion climbed up into the Hand’s chair. It seemed only appropriate.

“This is absurd,” the queen said at last. “My lord father has sent my brother to sit in his place in this council. He bids us accept Tyrion as the Hand of the King, until such time as he himself can join us.”

Grand Maester Pycelle stroked his flowing white beard and nodded ponderously. “It would seem that a welcome is in order.”

“Indeed.” Jowly, balding Janos Slynt looked rather like a frog, a smug frog who had gotten rather above himself. “We have sore need of you, my lord. Rebellion everywhere, this grim omen in the sky, rioting in the city streets...”

“And whose fault is that, Lord Janos?” Cersei lashed out. “Your gold cloaks are charged with keeping order. As to you, Tyrion, you could better serve us on the field of battle.”

He laughed. “No, I’m done with fields of battle, thank you. I sit a chair better than a horse, and I’d sooner hold a wine goblet than a battle-axe. All that about the thunder of the drums, sunlight flashing on armor, magnificent destriers snorting and prancing? Well, the drums gave me headaches, the sunlight flashing on my armor cooked me up like a harvest day goose, and those magnificent destriers shit *everywhere*. Not that I am complaining. Compared to the hospitality I enjoyed in the Vale of Arryn, drums, horseshit, and fly bites are my favorite things.”

Littlefinger laughed. “Well said, Lannister. A man after my own heart.”

Tyrion smiled at him, remembering a certain dagger with a dragonbone hilt and a Valyrian steel blade. *We must have a talk about that, and soon*. He wondered if Lord Petyr would find that subject amusing as well. “Please,” he told them, “do let me be of service, in whatever *small* way I can.”

Cersei read the letter again. “How many men have you brought with you?”

“A few hundred. My own men, chiefly. Father was loath to part with any of his. He *is* fighting a war, after all.”

“What use will your few hundred men be if Renly marches on the city, or Stannis sails from Dragonstone? I ask for an army and my father sends me a dwarf. The *king* names the Hand, with the consent of council. Joffrey named our lord father.”

“And our lord father named me.”

“He cannot do that. Not without Joff’s consent.”

“Lord Tywin is at Harrenhal with his host, if you’d care to take it up with him,” Tyrion said politely. “My lords, perchance you would permit me a private word with my sister?”

Varys slithered to his feet, smiling in that unctuous way he had. “How you must have yearned for the sound of your sweet sister’s voice. My lords, please, let us give them a few moments together. The woes of our troubled realm shall keep.”

Janos Slynt rose hesitantly and Grand Maester Pycelle ponderously, yet they rose. Littlefinger was the last. “Shall I tell the steward to prepare

chambers in Maegor's Holdfast?"

"My thanks, Lord Petyr, but I will be taking Lord Stark's former quarters in the Tower of the Hand."

Littlefinger laughed. "You're a braver man than me, Lannister. You *do* know the fate of our last two Hands?"

"Two? If you mean to frighten me, why not say four?"

"Four?" Littlefinger raised an eyebrow. "Did the Hands before Lord Arryn meet some dire end in the Tower? I'm afraid I was too young to pay them much mind."

"Aerys Targaryen's last Hand was killed during the Sack of King's Landing, though I doubt he'd had time to settle into the Tower. He was only Hand for a fortnight. The one before him was burned to death. And before them came two others who died landless and penniless in exile, and counted themselves lucky. I believe my lord father was the last Hand to depart King's Landing with his name, properties, and parts all intact."

"Fascinating," said Littlefinger. "And all the more reason I'd sooner bed down in the dungeon."

Perhaps you'll get that wish, Tyrion thought, but he said, "Courage and folly are cousins, or so I've heard. Whatever curse may linger over the Tower of the Hand, I pray I'm small enough to escape its notice."

Janos Slynt laughed, Littlefinger smiled, and Grand Maester Pycelle followed them both out, bowing gravely.

"I hope Father did not send you all this way to plague us with history lessons," his sister said when they were alone.

"How I have yearned for the sound of your sweet voice," Tyrion sighed to her.

"How I have yearned to have that eunuch's tongue pulled out with hot pincers," Cersei replied. "Has father lost his senses? Or did you forge this letter?" She read it once more, with mounting annoyance. "Why would he inflict *you* on me? I wanted him to come himself." She crushed Lord Tywin's letter in her fingers. "I am Joffrey's regent, and I sent him a royal *command*!"

“And he ignored you,” Tyrion pointed out. “He has quite a large army, he can do that. Nor is he the first. Is he?”

Cersei’s mouth tightened. He could see her color rising. “If I name this letter a forgery and tell them to throw you in a dungeon, no one will ignore *that*, I promise you.”

He was walking on rotten ice now, Tyrion knew. One false step and he would plunge through. “No one,” he agreed amiably, “least of all our father. The one with the army. But why should you want to throw me into a dungeon, sweet sister, when I’ve come all this long way to help you?”

“I do not require *your* help. It was our father’s presence that I commanded.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, “but it’s Jaime you want.”

His sister fancied herself subtle, but he had grown up with her. He could read her face like one of his favorite books, and what he read now was rage, and fear, and despair. “Jaime—”

“—is my brother no less than yours,” Tyrion interrupted. “Give me your support and I promise you, we will have Jaime freed and returned to us unharmed.”

“How?” Cersei demanded. “The Stark boy and his mother are not like to forget that we beheaded Lord Eddard.”

“True,” Tyrion agreed, “yet you still hold his daughters, don’t you? I saw the older girl out in the yard with Joffrey.”

“Sansa,” the queen said. “I’ve given it out that I have the younger brat as well, but it’s a lie. I sent Meryn Trant to take her in hand when Robert died, but her wretched dancing master interfered and the girl fled. No one has seen her since. Likely she’s dead. A great many people died that day.”

Tyrion had hoped for both Stark girls, but he supposed one would have to do. “Tell me about our friends on the council.”

His sister glanced at the door. “What of them?”

“Father seems to have taken a dislike to them. When I left him, he was wondering how their heads might look on the wall beside Lord Stark’s.” He

leaned forward across the table. “Are you certain of their loyalty? Do you trust them?”

“I trust no one,” Cersei snapped. “I need them. Does Father believe they are playing us false?”

“Suspects, rather.”

“Why? What does he know?”

Tyrion shrugged. “He knows that your son’s short reign has been a long parade of follies and disasters. That suggests that someone is giving Joffrey some very bad counsel.”

Cersei gave him a searching look. “Joff has had no lack of good counsel. He’s always been strong-willed. Now that he’s king, he believes he should do as he pleases, not as he’s bid.”

“Crowns do queer things to the heads beneath them,” Tyrion agreed. “This business with Eddard Stark... Joffrey’s work?”

The queen grimaced. “He was instructed to pardon Stark, to allow him to take the black. The man would have been out of our way forever, and we might have made peace with that son of his, but Joff took it upon himself to give the mob a better show. What was I to do? He called for Lord Eddard’s head in front of half the city. And Janos Slynt and Ser Ilyn went ahead blithely and shortened the man without a word from me!” Her hand tightened into a fist. “The High Septon claims we profaned Baelor’s Sept with blood, after lying to him about our intent.”

“It would seem he has a point,” said Tyrion. “So this *Lord* Slynt, he was part of it, was he? Tell me, whose fine notion was it to grant him Harrenhal and name him to the council?”

“Littlefinger made the arrangements. We needed Slynt’s gold cloaks. Eddard Stark was plotting with Renly and he’d written to Lord Stannis, offering him the throne. We might have lost all. Even so, it was a close thing. If Sansa hadn’t come to me and told me all her father’s plans...”

Tyrion was surprised. “Truly? His own daughter?” Sansa had always seemed such a sweet child, tender and courteous.

“The girl was wet with love. She would have done *anything* for Joffrey, until he cut off her father’s head and called it mercy. That put an end to that.”

“His Grace has a unique way of winning the hearts of his subjects,” Tyrion said with a crooked smile. “Was it Joffrey’s wish to dismiss Ser Barristan Selmy from his Kingsguard too?”

Cersei sighed. “Joff wanted someone to blame for Robert’s death. Varys suggested Ser Barristan. Why not? It gave Jaime command of the Kingsguard and a seat on the small council, and allowed Joff to throw a bone to his dog. He is very fond of Sandor Clegane. We were prepared to offer Selmy some land and a towerhouse, more than the useless old fool deserved.”

“I hear that useless old fool slew two of Slynt’s gold cloaks when they tried to seize him at the Mud Gate.”

His sister looked very unhappy. “Janos should have sent more men. He is not as competent as might be wished.”

“Ser Barristan was the Lord Commander of Robert Baratheon’s Kingsguard,” Tyrion reminded her pointedly. “He and Jaime are the only survivors of Aerys Targaryen’s seven. The smallfolk talk of him in the same way they talk of Serwyn of the Mirror Shield and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight. What do you imagine they’ll think when they see Barristan the Bold riding beside Robb Stark or Stannis Baratheon?”

Cersei glanced away. “I had not considered that.”

“Father did,” said Tyrion. “*That* is why he sent me. To put an end to these follies and bring your son to heel.”

“Joff will be no more tractable for you than for me.”

“He might.”

“Why should he?”

“He knows *you* would never hurt him.”

Cersei’s eyes narrowed. “If you believe I’d ever allow you to harm my son, you’re sick with fever.”

Tyrion sighed. She'd missed the point, as she did so often. "Joffrey is as safe with me as he is with you," he assured her, "but so long as the boy *feels* threatened, he'll be more inclined to listen." He took her hand. "I *am* your brother, you know. You need me, whether you care to admit it or no. Your son needs me, if he's to have a hope of retaining that ugly iron chair."

His sister seemed shocked that he would touch her. "You have always been cunning."

"In my own small way." He grinned.

"It may be worth the trying... but make no mistake, Tyrion. If I accept you, you shall be the King's Hand in name, but *my* Hand in truth. You will share all your plans and intentions with me before you act, and you will do *nothing* without my consent. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you agree?"

"Certainly," he lied. "I am yours, sister." *For as long as I need to be.* "So, now that we are of one purpose, we ought have no more secrets between us. You say Joffrey had Lord Eddard killed, Varys dismissed Ser Barristan, and Littlefinger gifted us with Lord Slynt. Who murdered Jon Arryn?"

Cersei yanked her hand back. "How should I know?"

"The grieving widow in the Eyrie seems to think it was me. Where did she come by that notion, I wonder?"

"I'm sure I don't know. That fool Eddard Stark accused me of the same thing. He hinted that Lord Arryn suspected or... well, believed..."

"That you were fucking our sweet Jaime?"

She slapped him.

"Did you think I was as blind as Father?" Tyrion rubbed his cheek. "Who you lie with is no matter to me... although it doesn't seem quite just that you should open your legs for one brother and not the other."

She slapped him.

“Be gentle, Cersei, I’m only jesting with you. If truth be told, I’d sooner have a nice whore. I never understood what Jaime saw in you, apart from his own reflection.”

She slapped him.

His cheeks were red and burning, yet he smiled. “If you keep doing that, I may get angry.”

That stayed her hand. “Why should I care if you do?”

“I have some new friends,” Tyrion confessed. “You won’t like them at all. How did you kill Robert?”

“He did that himself. All we did was help. When Lancel saw that Robert was going after boar, he gave him strongwine. His favorite sour red, but fortified, three times as potent as he was used to. The great stinking fool loved it. He could have stopped swilling it down anytime he cared to, but no, he drained one skin and told Lancel to fetch another. The boar did the rest. You should have been at the feast, Tyrion. There has never been a boar so delicious. They cooked it with mushrooms and apples, and it tasted like triumph.”

“Truly, sister, you were born to be a widow.” Tyrion had rather liked Robert Baratheon, great blustering oaf that he was... doubtless in part because his sister loathed him so. “Now, if you are done slapping me, I will be off.” He twisted his legs around and clambered down awkwardly from the chair.

Cersei frowned. “I haven’t given you leave to depart. I want to know how you intend to free Jaime.”

“I’ll tell you when I know. Schemes are like fruit, they require a certain ripening. Right now, I have a mind to ride through the streets and take the measure of this city.” Tyrion rested his hand on the head of the sphinx beside the door. “One parting request. Kindly make certain no harm comes to Sansa Stark. It would not do to lose *both* the daughters.”

Outside the council chamber, Tyrion nodded to Ser Mandon and made his way down the long vaulted hall. Bronn fell in beside him. Of Timett son of Timett there was no sign. “Where’s our red hand?” Tyrion asked.

“He felt an urge to explore. His kind was not made for waiting about in halls.”

“I hope he doesn’t kill anyone important.” The clansmen Tyrion had brought down from their fastnesses in the Mountains of the Moon were loyal in their own fierce way, but they were proud and quarrelsome as well, prone to answer insults real or imagined with steel. “Try to find him. And while you are at it, see that the rest have been quartered and fed. I want them in the barracks beneath the Tower of the Hand, but don’t let the steward put the Stone Crows near the Moon Brothers, and tell him the Burned Men must have a hall all to themselves.”

“Where will you be?”

“I’m riding back to the Broken Anvil.”

Bronn grinned insolently. “Need an escort? The talk is, the streets are dangerous.”

“I’ll call upon the captain of my sister’s household guard, and remind him that I am no less a Lannister than she is. He needs to recall that his oath is to Casterly Rock, not to Cersei or Joffrey.”

An hour later, Tyrion rode from the Red Keep accompanied by a dozen Lannister guardsmen in crimson cloaks and lion-crested halfhelms. As they passed beneath the portcullis, he noted the heads mounted atop the walls. Black with rot and old tar, they had long since become unrecognizable. “Captain Vylarr,” he called, “I want those taken down on the morrow. Give them to the silent sisters for cleaning.” It would be hell to match them with the bodies, he supposed, yet it must be done. Even in the midst of war certain decencies needed to be observed.

Vylarr grew hesitant. “His Grace has told us he wishes the traitors’ heads to remain on the walls until he fills those last three empty spikes there on the end.”

“Let me hazard a wild stab. One is for Robb Stark, the others for Lords Stannis and Renly. Would that be right?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“My nephew is thirteen years old today, Vylarr. Try and recall that. I’ll have the heads down on the morrow, or one of those empty spikes may have a different lodger. Do you take my meaning, Captain?”

“I’ll see that they’re taken down myself, my lord.”

“Good.” Tyrion put his heels into his horse and trotted away, leaving the red cloaks to follow as best they could.

He had told Cersei he intended to take the measure of the city. That was not entirely a lie. Tyrion Lannister was not pleased by much of what he saw. The streets of King’s Landing had always been teeming and raucous and noisy, but now they reeked of danger in a way that he did not recall from past visits. A naked corpse sprawled in the gutter near the Street of Looms, being torn at by a pack of feral dogs, yet no one seemed to care. Watchmen were much in evidence, moving in pairs through the alleys in their gold cloaks and shirts of black ringmail, iron cudgels never far from their hands. The markets were crowded with ragged men selling their household goods for any price they could get... and conspicuously empty of farmers selling food. What little produce he did see was three times as costly as it had been a year ago. One peddler was hawking rats roasted on a skewer. “*Fresh rats,*” he cried loudly, “*fresh rats.*” Doubtless fresh rats were to be preferred to old stale rotten rats. The frightening thing was, the rats looked more appetizing than most of what the butchers were selling. On the Street of Flour, Tyrion saw guards at every other shop door. When times grew lean, even bakers found sellswords cheaper than bread, he reflected.

“There is no food coming in, is there?” he said to Vylarr.

“Little enough,” the captain admitted. “With the war in the riverlands and Lord Renly raising rebels in Highgarden, the roads are closed to south and west.”

“And what has my good sister done about this?”

“She is taking steps to restore the king’s peace,” Vylarr assured him. “Lord Slynt has tripled the size of the City Watch, and the queen has put a thousand craftsmen to work on our defenses. The stonemasons are strengthening the walls, carpenters are building scorpions and catapults by

the hundred, fletchers are making arrows, the smiths are forging blades, and the Alchemists' Guild has pledged ten thousand jars of wildfire."

Tyrion shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. He was pleased that Cersei had not been idle, but wildfire was treacherous stuff, and ten thousand jars were enough to turn all of King's Landing into cinders. "Where has my sister found the coin to pay for all of this?" It was no secret that King Robert had left the crown vastly in debt, and alchemists were seldom mistaken for altruists.

"Lord Littlefinger always finds a way, my lord. He has imposed a tax on those wishing to enter the city."

"Yes, that would work," Tyrion said, thinking, *Clever. Clever and cruel*. Tens of thousands had fled the fighting for the supposed safety of King's Landing. He had seen them on the kingsroad, troupes of mothers and children and anxious fathers who had gazed on his horses and wagons with covetous eyes. Once they reached the city they would doubtless pay over all they had to put those high comforting walls between them and the war... though they might think twice if they knew about the wildfire.

The inn beneath the sign of the broken anvil stood within sight of those walls, near the Gate of the Gods where they had entered that morning. As they rode into its courtyard, a boy ran out to help Tyrion down from his horse. "Take your men back to the castle," he told Vylarr. "I'll be spending the night here."

The captain looked dubious. "Will you be safe, my lord?"

"Well, as to that, Captain, when I left the inn this morning it was full of Black Ears. One is never quite safe when Chella daughter of Cheyk is about." Tyrion waddled toward the door, leaving Vylarr to puzzle at his meaning.

A gust of merriment greeted him as he shoved into the inn's common room. He recognized Chella's throaty chuckle and the lighter music of Shae's laughter. The girl was seated by the hearth, sipping wine at a round wooden table with three of the Black Ears he'd left to guard her and a plump man whose back was to him. The innkeeper, he assumed... until

Shae called Tyrion by name and the intruder rose. “My good lord, I am so pleased to see you,” he gushed, a soft eunuch’s smile on his powdered face.

Tyrion stumbled. “Lord Varys. I had not thought to see you here.” *The Others take him, how did he find them so quickly?*

“Forgive me if I intrude,” Varys said. “I was taken by a sudden urge to meet your young lady.”

“Young lady,” Shae repeated, savoring the words. “You’re half right, m’lord. I’m young.”

Eighteen, Tyrion thought. *Eighteen, and a whore, but quick of wit, nimble as a cat between the sheets, with large dark eyes and fine black hair and a sweet, soft, hungry little mouth... and mine! Damn you, eunuch.* “I fear I’m the intruder, Lord Varys,” he said with forced courtesy. “When I came in, you were in the midst of some merriment.”

“M’lord Varys complimented Chella on her ears and said she must have killed many men to have such a fine necklace,” Shae explained. It grated on him to hear her call Varys *m’lord* in that tone; that was what she called him in their pillow play. “And Chella told him only cowards kill the vanquished.”

“Braver to leave the man alive, with a chance to cleanse his shame by winning back his ear,” explained Chella, a small dark woman whose grisly neckware was hung with no less than forty-six dried, wrinkled ears. Tyrion had counted them once. “Only so can you prove you do not fear your enemies.”

Shae hooted. “And then m’lord says if he was a Black Ear he’d never sleep, for dreams of one-eared men.”

“A problem I will never need face,” Tyrion said. “I’m terrified of my enemies, so I kill them all.”

Varys giggled. “Will you take some wine with us, my lord?”

“I’ll take some wine.” Tyrion seated himself beside Shae. He understood what was happening here, if Chella and the girl did not. Varys was delivering a message. When he said, *I was taken by a sudden urge to meet your young lady*, what he meant was, *You tried to hide her, but I knew*

where she was, and who she was, and here I am. He wondered who had betrayed him. The innkeeper, that boy in the stable, a guard on the gate... or one of his own?

"I always like to return to the city through the Gate of the Gods," Varys told Shae as he filled the wine cups. "The carvings on the gatehouse are exquisite, they make me weep each time I see them. The eyes... so expressive, don't you think? They almost seem to follow you as you ride beneath the portcullis."

"I never noticed, m'lord," Shae replied. "I'll look again on the morrow, if it please you."

Don't bother, sweetling, Tyrion thought, swirling the wine in the cup. *He cares not a whit about carvings. The eyes he boasts of are his own. What he means is that he was watching, that he knew we were here the moment we passed through the gates.*

"Do be careful, child," Varys urged. "King's Landing is not wholly safe these days. I know these streets well, and yet I almost feared to come today, alone and unarmed as I was. Lawless men are everywhere in this dark time, oh, yes. Men with cold steel and colder hearts." *Where I can come alone and unarmed, others can come with swords in their fists,* he was saying.

Shae only laughed. "If they try and bother me, they'll be one ear short when Chella runs them off."

Varys hooted as if that was the funniest thing he had ever heard, but there was no laughter in his eyes when he turned them on Tyrion. "Your young lady has an amiable way to her. I should take very good care of her if I were you."

"I intend to. Any man who tries to harm her—well, I'm too small to be a Black Ear, and I make no claims to courage." *See? I speak the same tongue you do, eunuch. Hurt her, and I'll have your head.*

"I will leave you." Varys rose. "I know how weary you must be. I only wished to welcome you, my lord, and tell you how very pleased I am by your arrival. We have dire need of you on the council. Have you seen the comet?"

“I’m short, not blind,” Tyrion said. Out on the kingsroad, it had seemed to cover half the sky, outshining the crescent moon.

“In the streets, they call it the Red Messenger,” Varys said. “They say it comes as a herald before a king, to warn of fire and blood to follow.” The eunuch rubbed his powdered hands together. “May I leave you with a bit of a riddle, Lord Tyrion?” He did not wait for an answer. “In a room sit three great men, a king, a priest, and a rich man with his gold. Between them stands a sellsword, a little man of common birth and no great mind. Each of the great ones bids him slay the other two. ‘Do it’ says the king, ‘for I am your lawful ruler.’ ‘Do it’ says the priest, ‘for I command you in the names of the gods.’ ‘Do it’ says the rich man, ‘and all this gold shall be yours.’ So tell me—who lives and who dies?” Bowing deeply, the eunuch hurried from the common room on soft slippered feet.

When he was gone, Chella gave a snort and Shae wrinkled up her pretty face. “The rich man lives. Doesn’t he?”

Tyrion sipped at his wine, thoughtful. “Perhaps. Or not. That would depend on the sellsword, it seems.” He set down his cup. “Come, let’s go upstairs.”

She had to wait for him at the top of the steps, for her legs were slim and supple while his were short and stunted and full of aches. But she was smiling when he reached her. “Did you miss me?” she teased as she took his hand.

“Desperately,” Tyrion admitted. Shae only stood a shade over five feet, yet still he must look up to her... but in her case he found he did not mind. She was sweet to look up at.

“You’ll miss me all the time in your Red Keep,” she said as she led him to her room. “All alone in your cold bed in your Tower of the Hand.”

“Too true.” Tyrion would gladly have kept her with him, but his lord father had forbidden it. *You will not take the whore to court*, Lord Tywin had commanded. Bringing her to the city was as much defiance as he dared. All his authority derived from his father, the girl had to understand that. “You won’t be far,” he promised. “You’ll have a house, with guards and servants, and I’ll visit as often as I’m able.”

Shae kicked shut the door. Through the cloudy panes of the narrow window, he could make out the Great Sept of Baelor crowning Visenya's Hill but Tyrion was distracted by a different sight. Bending, Shae took her gown by the hem, drew it over her head, and tossed it aside. She did not believe in smallclothes. "You'll never be able to rest," she said as she stood before him, pink and nude and lovely, one hand braced on her hip. "You'll think of me every time you go to bed. Then you'll get hard and you'll have no one to help you and you'll never be able to sleep unless you"—she grinned that wicked grin Tyrion liked so well—"is *that* why they call it the Tower of the Hand, m'lord?"

"Be quiet and kiss me," he commanded.

He could taste the wine on her lips, and feel her small firm breasts pressed against him as her fingers moved to the lacings of his breeches. "My lion," she whispered when he broke off the kiss to undress. "My sweet lord, my giant of Lannister." Tyrion pushed her toward the bed. When he entered her, she screamed loud enough to wake Baelor the Blessed in his tomb, and her nails left gouges in his back. He'd never had a pain he liked half so well.

Fool, he thought to himself afterward, as they lay in the center of the sagging mattress amidst the rumpled sheets. *Will you never learn, dwarf? She's a whore, damn you, it's your coin she loves, not your cock. Remember Tysha?* Yet when his fingers trailed lightly over one nipple, it stiffened at the touch, and he could see the mark on her breast where he'd bitten her in his passion.

"So what will you do, m'lord, now that you're the Hand of the King?" Shae asked him as he cupped that warm sweet flesh.

"Something Cersei will never expect," Tyrion murmured softly against her slender neck. "I'll do... justice."