

TYRION

He dreamed of a cracked stone ceiling and the smells of blood and shit and burnt flesh. The air was full of acrid smoke. Men were groaning and whimpering all around him, and from time to time a scream would pierce the air, thick with pain. When he tried to move, he found that he had fouled his own bedding. The smoke in the air made his eyes water. *Am I crying?* He must not let his father see. He was a Lannister of Casterly Rock. *A lion, I must be a lion, live a lion, die a lion.* He hurt so much, though. Too weak to groan, he lay in his own filth and shut his eyes. Nearby someone was cursing the gods in a heavy, monotonous voice. He listened to the blasphemies and wondered if he was dying. After a time the room faded.

He found himself outside the city, walking through a world without color. Ravens soared through a grey sky on wide black wings, while carrion crows rose from their feasts in furious clouds wherever he set his steps. White maggots burrowed through black corruption. The wolves were grey, and so were the silent sisters; together they stripped the flesh from the fallen. There were corpses strewn all over the tourney fields. The sun was a hot white penny, shining down upon the grey river as it rushed around the charred bones of sunken ships. From the pyres of the dead rose black columns of smoke and white-hot ashes. *My work*, thought Tyrion Lannister. *They died at my command.*

At first there was no sound in the world, but after a time he began to hear the voices of the dead, soft and terrible. They wept and moaned, they begged for an end to pain, they cried for help and wanted their mothers. Tyrion had never known his mother. He wanted Shae, but she was not there. He walked alone amidst grey shadows, trying to remember...

The silent sisters were stripping the dead men of their armor and clothes. All the bright dyes had leached out from the surcoats of the slain; they were garbed in shades of white and grey, and their blood was black and crusty. He watched their naked bodies lifted by arm and leg, to be carried

swinging to the pyres to join their fellows. Metal and cloth were thrown in the back of a white wooden wagon, pulled by two tall black horses.

So many dead, so very many. Their corpses hung limply, their faces slack or stiff or swollen with gas, unrecognizable, hardly human. The garments the sisters took from them were decorated with black hearts, grey lions, dead flowers, and pale ghostly stags. Their armor was all dented and gashed, the chainmail riven, broken, slashed. *Why did I kill them all?* He had known once, but somehow he had forgotten.

He would have asked one of the silent sisters, but when he tried to speak he found he had no mouth. Smooth seamless skin covered his teeth. The discovery terrified him. How could he live without a mouth? He began to run. The city was not far. He would be safe inside the city, away from all these dead. He did not belong with the dead. He had no mouth, but he was still a living man. *No, a lion, a lion, and alive.* But when he reached the city walls, the gates were shut against him.

It was dark when he woke again. At first he could see nothing, but after a time the vague outlines of a bed appeared around him. The drapes were drawn, but he could see the shape of carved bedposts, and the droop of the velvet canopy over his head. Under him was the yielding softness of a featherbed, and the pillow beneath his head was goose down. *My own bed, I am in my own bed, in my own bedchamber.*

It was warm inside the drapes, under the great heap of furs and blankets that covered him. He was sweating. *Fever*, he thought groggily. He felt so weak, and the pain stabbed through him when he struggled to lift his hand. He gave up the effort. His head felt enormous, as big as the bed, too heavy to raise from the pillow. His body he could scarcely feel at all. *How did I come here?* He tried to remember. The battle came back in fits and flashes. The fight along the river, the knight who'd offered up his gauntlet, the bridge of ships...

Ser Mandon. He saw the dead empty eyes, the reaching hand, the green fire shining against the white enamel plate. Fear swept over him in a cold rush; beneath the sheets he could feel his bladder letting go. He would have cried out, if he'd had a mouth. *No, that was the dream*, he thought, his head

pounding. *Help me, someone help me. Jaime, Shae, Mother, someone... Tysha...*

No one heard. No one came. Alone in the dark, he fell back into piss-scented sleep. He dreamed his sister was standing over his bed, with their lord father beside her, frowning. It had to be a dream, since Lord Tywin was a thousand leagues away, fighting Robb Stark in the west. Others came and went as well. Varys looked down on him and sighed, but Littlefinger made a quip. *Bloody treacherous bastard*, Tyrion thought venomously, *we sent you to Bitterbridge and you never came back*. Sometimes he could hear them talking to one another, but he did not understand the words. Their voices buzzed in his ears like wasps muffled in thick felt.

He wanted to ask if they'd won the battle. *We must have, else I'd be a head on a spike somewhere. If I live, we won*. He did not know what pleased him more: the victory, or the fact he had been able to reason it out. His wits were coming back to him, however slowly. That was good. His wits were all he had.

The next time he woke, the draperies had been pulled back, and Podrick Payne stood over him with a candle. When he saw Tyrion open his eyes he ran off. *No, don't go, help me, help*, he tried to call, but the best he could do was a muffled moan. *I have no mouth*. He raised a hand to his face, his every movement pained and fumbling. His fingers found stiff cloth where they should have found flesh, lips, teeth. *Linen*. The lower half of his face was bandaged tightly, a mask of hardened plaster with holes for breathing and feeding.

A short while later Pod reappeared. This time a stranger was with him, a maester chained and robed. "My lord, you must be still," the man murmured. "You are grievous hurt. You will do yourself great injury. Are you thirsty?"

He managed an awkward nod. The maester inserted a curved copper funnel through the feeding hole over his mouth and poured a slow trickle down his throat. Tyrion swallowed, scarcely tasting. Too late he realized the liquid was milk of the poppy. By the time the maester removed the funnel from his mouth, he was already spiraling back to sleep.

This time he dreamed he was at a feast, a victory feast in some great hall. He had a high seat on the dais, and men were lifting their goblets and hailing him as hero. Marillion was there, the singer who'd journeyed with them through the Mountains of the Moon. He played his woodharp and sang of the Imp's daring deeds. Even his father was smiling with approval. When the song was over, Jaime rose from his place, commanded Tyrion to kneel, and touched him first on one shoulder and then on the other with his golden sword, and he rose up a knight. Shae was waiting to embrace him. She took him by the hand, laughing and teasing, calling him her giant of Lannister.

He woke in darkness to a cold empty room. The draperies had been drawn again. Something felt wrong, turned around, though he could not have said what. He was alone once more. Pushing back the blankets, he tried to sit, but the pain was too much and he soon subsided, breathing raggedly. His face was the least part of it. His right side was one huge ache, and a stab of pain went through his chest whenever he lifted his arm. *What's happened to me?* Even the battle seemed half a dream when he tried to think back on it. *I was hurt more badly than I knew. Ser Mandon...*

The memory frightened him, but Tyrion made himself hold it, turn it in his head, stare at it hard. *He tried to kill me, no mistake. That part was not a dream. He would have cut me in half if Pod had not... Pod, where's Pod?*

Gritting his teeth, he grabbed hold of the bed hangings and yanked. The drapes ripped free of the canopy overhead and tumbled down, half on the rushes and half on him. Even that small effort had dizzied him. The room whirled around him, all bare walls and dark shadows, with a single narrow window. He saw a chest he'd owned, an untidy pile of his clothing, his battered armor. *This is not my bedchamber*, he realized. *Not even the Tower of the Hand.* Someone had moved him. His shout of anger came out as a muffled moan. *They have moved me here to die*, he thought as he gave up the struggle and closed his eyes once more. The room was dank and cold, and he was burning.

He dreamed of a better place, a snug little cottage by the sunset sea. The walls were lopsided and cracked and the floor had been made of

packed earth, but he had always been warm there, even when they let the fire go out. *She used to tease me about that*, he remembered. *I never thought to feed the fire, that had always been a servant's task.* “We have no servants,” she would remind me, and I would say, “You have me, I’m your servant,” and she would say, “A lazy servant. What do they do with lazy servants in Casterly Rock, my lord?” and he would tell her, “They kiss them.” That would always make her giggle. “They do not neither. They beat them, I bet,” she would say, but he would insist, “No, they kiss them, just like this.” He would show her how. “They kiss their fingers first, every one, and they kiss their wrists, yes, and inside their elbows. Then they kiss their funny ears, all our servants have funny ears. Stop laughing! And they kiss their cheeks and they kiss their noses with the little bump in them, there, so, like that, and they kiss their sweet brows and their hair and their lips, their... mmmm... mouths... so...”

They would kiss for hours, and spend whole days doing no more than lolling in bed, listening to the waves, and touching each other. Her body was a wonder to him, and she seemed to find delight in his. Sometimes she would sing to him. *I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.* “I love you, Tyrion,” she would whisper before they went to sleep at night. “I love your lips. I love your voice, and the words you say to me, and how you treat me gentle. I love your face.”

“My face?”

“Yes. Yes. I love your hands, and how you touch me. Your cock, I love your cock, I love how it feels when it’s in me.”

“It loves you too, my lady.”

“I love to say your name. Tyrion Lannister. It goes with mine. Not the Lannister, t’other part. Tyrion and Tysha. Tysha and Tyrion. Tyrion. My lord Tyrion...”

Lies, he thought, *all feigned, all for gold, she was a whore, Jaime's whore, Jaime's gift, my lady of the lie.* Her face seemed to fade away, dissolving behind a veil of tears, but even after she was gone he could still hear the faint, far-off sound of her voice, calling his name. “...my lord, can you hear me? My lord? Tyrion? My lord? My lord? My lord?”

Through a haze of popped sleep, he saw a soft pink face leaning over him. He was back in the dank room with the torn bed hangings, and the face was wrong, not hers, too round, with a brown fringe of beard. “Do you thirst, my lord? I have your milk, your good milk. You must not fight, no, don’t try to move, you need your rest.” He had the copper funnel in one damp pink hand and a flask in the other.

As the man leaned close, Tyrion’s fingers slid underneath his chain of many metals, grabbed, pulled. The maester dropped the flask, spilling milk of the poppy all over the blanket. Tyrion twisted until he could feel the links digging into the flesh of the man’s fat neck. “No. More,” he croaked, so hoarse he was not certain he had even spoken. But he must have, for the maester choked out a reply. “Unhand, please, my lord... need your milk, the pain... the chain, don’t, unhand, no...”

The pink face was beginning to purple when Tyrion let go. The maester reeled back, sucking in air. His reddened throat showed deep white gouges where the links had pressed. His eyes were white too. Tyrion raised a hand to his face and made a ripping motion over the hardened mask. And again. And again.

“You... you want the bandages off, is that it?” the maester said at last. “But I’m not to... that would be... be most unwise, my lord. You are not yet healed, the queen would...”

The mention of his sister made Tyrion growl. *Are you one of hers, then?* He pointed a finger at the maester, then coiled his hand into a fist. Crushing, choking, a promise, unless the fool did as he was bid.

Thankfully, he understood. “I... I will do as my lord commands, to be sure, but... this is unwise, your wounds...”

“*Do. It.*” Louder that time.

Bowing, the man left the room, only to return a few moments later, bearing a long knife with a slender sawtooth blade, a basin of water, a pile of soft cloths, and several flasks. By then Tyrion had managed to squirm backward a few inches, so he was half sitting against his pillow. The maester bade him be very still as he slid the tip of the knife in under his chin, beneath the mask. *A slip of the hand here, and Cersei will be free of*

me, he thought. He could feel the blade sawing through the stiffened linen, only inches above his throat.

Fortunately this soft pink man was not one of his sister's braver creatures. After a moment he felt cool air on his cheeks. There was pain as well, but he did his best to ignore that. The maester discarded the bandages, still crusty with potion. "Be still now, I must wash out the wound." His touch was gentle, the water warm and soothing. *The wound*, Tyrion thought, remembering a sudden flash of bright silver that seemed to pass just below his eyes. "This is like to sting some," the maester warned as he wet a cloth with wine that smelled of crushed herbs. It did more than sting. It traced a line of fire all the way across Tyrion's face, and twisted a burning poker up his nose. His fingers clawed the bedclothes and he sucked in his breath, but somehow he managed not to scream. The maester was clucking like an old hen. "It would have been wiser to leave the mask in place until the flesh had knit, my lord. Still, it looks clean, good, good. When we found you down in that cellar among the dead and dying, your wounds were filthy. One of your ribs was broken, doubtless you can feel it, the blow of some mace perhaps, or a fall, it's hard to say. And you took an arrow in the arm, there where it joins the shoulder. It showed signs of mortification, and for a time I feared you might lose the limb, but we treated it with boiling wine and maggots, and now it seems to be healing clean..."

"Name," Tyrion breathed up at him. "*Name*."

The maester blinked. "Why, you are Tyrion Lannister, my lord. Brother to the queen. Do you remember the battle? Sometimes with head wounds ___"

"*Your* name." His throat was raw, and his tongue had forgotten how to shape the words.

"I am Maester Ballabar."

"Ballabar," Tyrion repeated. "Bring me. Looking glass."

"My lord," the maester said, "I would not counsel... that might be, ah, unwise, as it were... your wound..."

“*Bring* it,” he had to say. His mouth was stiff and sore, as if a punch had split his lip. “And drink. *Wine*. No poppy.”

The maester rose flush-faced and hurried off. He came back with a flagon of pale amber wine and a small silvered looking glass in an ornate golden frame. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he poured half a cup of wine and held it to Tyrion’s swollen lips. The trickle went down cool, though he could hardly taste it. “*More*,” he said when the cup was empty. Maester Ballabar poured again. By the end of the second cup, Tyrion Lannister felt strong enough to face his face.

He turned over the glass, and did not know whether he ought to laugh or cry. The gash was long and crooked, starting a hair under his left eye and ending on the right side of his jaw. Three-quarters of his nose was gone, and a chunk of his lip. Someone had sewn the torn flesh together with catgut, and their clumsy stitches were still in place across the seam of raw, red, half-healed flesh. “*Pretty*,” he croaked, flinging the glass aside.

He remembered now. The bridge of boats, Ser Mandon Moore, a hand, a sword coming at his face. *If I had not pulled back, that cut would have taken off the top of my head.* Jaime had always said that Ser Mandon was the most dangerous of the Kingsguard, because his dead empty eyes gave no hint to his intentions. *I should never have trusted any of them.* He’d known that Ser Meryn and Ser Boros were his sister’s, and Ser Osmund later, but he had let himself believe that the others were not wholly lost to honor. *Cersei must have paid him to see that I never came back from the battle. Why else? I never did Ser Mandon any harm that I know of.* Tyrion touched his face, plucking at the proud flesh with blunt thick fingers. *Another gift from my sweet sister.*

The maester stood beside the bed like a goose about to take flight. “My lord, there, there will most like be a scar...”

“*Most like?*” His snort of laughter turned into a wince of pain. There would be a scar, to be sure. Nor was it likely that his nose would be growing back anytime soon. It was not as if his face had ever been fit to look at. “Teach me, not to, play with, axes.” His grin felt tight. “Where, are

we? What, what place?" It hurt to talk, but Tyrion had been too long in silence.

"Ah, you are in Maegor's Holdfast, my lord. A chamber over the Queen's Ballroom. Her Grace wanted you kept close, so she might watch over you herself."

I'll wager she did. "Return me," Tyrion commanded. "Own bed. Own chambers." *Where I will have my own men about me, and my own maester too, if I find one I can trust.*

"Your own... my lord, that would not be possible. The King's Hand has taken up residence in your former chambers."

"I. *Am.* King's Hand." He was growing exhausted by the effort of speaking, and confused by what he was hearing.

Maester Ballabar looked distressed. "No, my lord, I... you were wounded, near death. Your lord father has taken up those duties now. Lord Tywin, he..."

"Here?"

"Since the night of the battle. Lord Tywin saved us all. The smallfolk say it was King Renly's ghost, but wiser men know better. It was your father and Lord Tyrell, with the Knight of Flowers and Lord Littlefinger. They rode through the ashes and took the usurper Stannis in the rear. It was a great victory, and now Lord Tywin has settled into the Tower of the Hand to help His Grace set the realm to rights, gods be praised."

"Gods be praised," Tyrion repeated hollowly. His bloody father *and* bloody Littlefinger and *Renly's ghost*? "I want..." *Who do I want?* He could not tell pink Ballabar to fetch him Shae. Who could he send for, who could he trust? Varys? Bronn? Ser Jacelyn? "...my squire," he finished. "Pod. Payne." *It was Pod on the bridge of boats, the lad saved my life.*

"The boy? The odd boy?"

"Odd boy. Podrick. Payne. You go. Send *him*."

"As you will, my lord." Maester Ballabar bobbed his head and hurried out. Tyrion could feel the strength seeping out of him as he waited. He

wondered how long he had been here, asleep. *Cersei would have me sleep forever, but I won't be so obliging.*

Podrick Payne entered the bedchamber timid as a mouse. "My lord?" He crept close to the bed. *How can a boy so bold in battle be so frightened in a sickroom?* Tyrion wondered. "I meant to stay by you, but the maester sent me away."

"Send *him* away. Hear me. Talk's hard. Need dreamwine. *Dreamwine*, not milk of the poppy. Go to Frenken. *Frenken*, not Ballabar. Watch him make it. Bring it here." Pod stole a glance at Tyrion's face, and just as quickly averted his eyes. *Well, I cannot blame him for that.* "I want," Tyrion went on, "mine own. Guard. Bronn. Where's Bronn?"

"They made him a knight."

Even frowning hurt. "Find him. Bring him."

"As you say. My lord. Bronn."

Tyrion seized the lad's wrist. "Ser Mandon?"

The boy flinched. "I n-never meant to k-k-k-k—"

"*Dead?* You're, certain? *Dead?*"

He shuffled his feet, sheepish. "Drowned."

"Good. Say nothing. Of him. Of me. Any of it. *Nothing.*"

By the time his squire left, the last of Tyrion's strength was gone as well. He lay back and closed his eyes. Perhaps he would dream of Tysha again. *I wonder how she'd like my face now*, he thought bitterly.