

TYRION

They had taken shelter beneath a copse of aspens just off the high road. Tyrion was gathering deadwood while their horses took water from a mountain stream. He stooped to pick up a splintered branch and examined it critically. “Will this do? I am not practiced at starting fires. Morrec did that for me.”

“A *fire*?” Bronn said, spitting. “Are you so hungry to die, dwarf? Or have you taken leave of your senses? A fire will bring the clansmen down on us from miles around. I mean to survive this journey, Lannister.”

“And how do you hope to do that?” Tyrion asked. He tucked the branch under his arm and poked around through the sparse undergrowth, looking for more. His back ached from the effort of bending; they had been riding since daybreak, when a stone-faced Ser Lyn Corbray had ushered them through the Bloody Gate and commanded them never to return.

“We have no chance of fighting our way back,” Bronn said, “but two can cover more ground than ten, and attract less notice. The fewer days we spend in these mountains, the more like we are to reach the riverlands. Ride hard and fast, I say. Travel by night and hole up by day, avoid the road where we can, make no noise and light no fires.”

Tyrion Lannister sighed. “A splendid plan, Bronn. Try it, as you like... and forgive me if I do not linger to bury you.”

“You think to outlive *me*, dwarf?” The sellsword grinned. He had a dark gap in his smile where the edge of Ser Vardis Egen’s shield had cracked a tooth in half.

Tyrion shrugged. “Riding hard and fast by night is a sure way to tumble down a mountain and crack your skull. I prefer to make my crossing slow and easy. I know you love the taste of horse, Bronn, but if our mounts die under us this time, we’ll be trying to saddle shadowcats... and if truth be told, I think the clans will find us no matter what we do. Their eyes are all

around us.” He swept a gloved hand over the high, wind-carved crags that surrounded them.

Bronn grimaced. “Then we’re dead men, Lannister.”

“If so, I prefer to die comfortable,” Tyrion replied. “We need a fire. The nights are cold up here, and hot food will warm our bellies and lift our spirits. Do you suppose there’s any game to be had? Lady Lysa has kindly provided us with a veritable feast of salt beef, hard cheese, and stale bread, but I would hate to break a tooth so far from the nearest maester.”

“I can find meat.” Beneath a fall of black hair, Bronn’s dark eyes regarded Tyrion suspiciously. “I should leave you here with your fool’s fire. If I took your horse, I’d have twice the chance to make it through. What would you do then, dwarf?”

“Die, most like.” Tyrion stooped to get another stick.

“You don’t think I’d do it?”

“You’d do it in an instant, if it meant your life. You were quick enough to silence your friend Chiggen when he caught that arrow in his belly.” Bronn had yanked back the man’s head by the hair and driven the point of his dirk in under the ear, and afterward told Catelyn Stark that the other sellsword had died of his wound.

“He was good as dead,” Bronn said, “and his moaning was bringing them down on us. Chiggen would have done the same for me... and he was no friend, only a man I rode with. Make no mistake, dwarf. I fought for you, but I do not love you.”

“It was your blade I needed,” Tyrion said, “not your love.” He dumped his armful of wood on the ground.

Bronn grinned. “You’re bold as any sellsword, I’ll give you that. How did you know I’d take your part?”

“Know?” Tyrion squatted awkwardly on his stunted legs to build the fire. “I tossed the dice. Back at the inn, you and Chiggen helped take me captive. Why? The others saw it as their duty, for the honor of the lords they served, but not you two. You had no lord, no duty, and precious little honor, so why trouble to involve yourselves?” He took out his knife and whittled

some thin strips of bark off one of the sticks he'd gathered, to serve as kindling. "Well, why do sellswords do anything? For gold. You were thinking Lady Catelyn would reward you for your help, perhaps even take you into her service. Here, that should do, I hope. Do you have a flint?"

Bronn slid two fingers into the pouch at his belt and tossed down a flint. Tyrion caught it in the air.

"My thanks," he said. "The thing is, you did not know the Starks. Lord Eddard is a proud, honorable, and honest man, and his lady wife is worse. Oh, no doubt she would have found a coin or two for you when this was all over, and pressed it in your hand with a polite word and a look of distaste, but that's the most you could have hoped for. The Starks look for courage and loyalty and honor in the men they choose to serve them, and if truth be told, you and Chiggen were lowborn scum." Tyrion struck the flint against his dagger, trying for a spark. Nothing.

Bronn snorted. "You have a bold tongue, little man. One day someone is like to cut it out and make you eat it."

"Everyone tells me that." Tyrion glanced up at the sellsword. "Did I offend you? My pardons... but you *are* scum, Bronn, make no mistake. Duty, honor, friendship, what's that to you? No, don't trouble yourself, we both know the answer. Still, you're not stupid. Once we reached the Vale, Lady Stark had no more need of you... but I did, and the one thing the Lannisters have never lacked for is gold. When the moment came to toss the dice, I was counting on your being smart enough to know where your best interest lay. Happily for me, you did." He slammed stone and steel together again, fruitlessly.

"Here," said Bronn, squatting, "I'll do it." He took the knife and flint from Tyrion's hands and struck sparks on his first try. A curl of bark began to smolder.

"Well done," Tyrion said. "Scum you may be, but you're undeniably useful, and with a sword in your hand you're almost as good as my brother Jaime. What do you want, Bronn? Gold? Land? Women? Keep me alive, and you'll have it."

Bronn blew gently on the fire, and the flames leapt up higher. “And if you die?”

“Why then, I’ll have one mourner whose grief is sincere,” Tyrion said, grinning. “The gold ends when I do.”

The fire was blazing up nicely. Bronn stood, tucked the flint back into his pouch, and tossed Tyrion his dagger. “Fair enough,” he said. “My sword’s yours, then... but don’t go looking for me to bend the knee and *m’lord* you every time you take a shit. I’m no man’s toady.”

“Nor any man’s friend,” Tyrion said. “I’ve no doubt you’d betray me as quick as you did Lady Stark, if you saw a profit in it. If the day ever comes when you’re tempted to sell me out, remember this, Bronn—I’ll match their price, whatever it is. I *like* living. And now, do you think you could do something about finding us some supper?”

“Take care of the horses,” Bronn said, unsheathing the long dirk he wore at his hip. He strode into the trees.

An hour later the horses had been rubbed down and fed, the fire was crackling away merrily, and a haunch of a young goat was turning above the flames, spitting and hissing. “All we lack now is some good wine to wash down our kid,” Tyrion said.

“That, a woman, and another dozen swords,” Bronn said. He sat cross-legged beside the fire, honing the edge of his longsword with an oilstone. There was something strangely reassuring about the rasping sound it made when he drew it down the steel. “It will be full dark soon,” the sellsword pointed out. “I’ll take first watch... for all the good it will do us. It might be kinder to let them kill us in our sleep.”

“Oh, I imagine they’ll be here long before it comes to sleep.” The smell of the roasting meat made Tyrion’s mouth water.

Bronn watched him across the fire. “You have a plan,” he said flatly, with a scrape of steel on stone.

“A hope, call it,” Tyrion said. “Another toss of the dice.”

“With our lives as the stake?”

Tyrion shrugged. "What choice do we have?" He leaned over the fire and sawed a thin slice of meat from the kid. "Ahhhh," he sighed happily as he chewed. Grease ran down his chin. "A bit tougher than I'd like, and in want of spicing, but I'll not complain too loudly. If I were back at the Eyrie, I'd be dancing on a precipice in hopes of a boiled bean."

"And yet you gave the turnkey a purse of gold," Bronn said.

"A Lannister always pays his debts."

Even Mord had scarcely believed it when Tyrion tossed him the leather purse. The gaoler's eyes had gone big as boiled eggs as he yanked open the drawstring and beheld the glint of gold. "I kept the silver," Tyrion had told him with a crooked smile, "but you were promised the gold, and there it is." It was more than a man like Mord could hope to earn in a lifetime of abusing prisoners. "And remember what I said, this is only a taste. If you ever grow tired of Lady Arryn's service, present yourself at Casterly Rock, and I'll pay you the rest of what I owe you." With golden dragons spilling out of both hands, Mord had fallen to his knees and promised that he would do just that.

Bronn yanked out his dirk and pulled the meat from the fire. He began to carve thick chunks of charred meat off the bone as Tyrion hollowed out two heels of stale bread to serve as trenchers. "If we do reach the river, what will you do then?" the sellsword asked as he cut.

"Oh, a whore and a featherbed and a flagon of wine, for a start." Tyrion held out his trencher, and Bronn filled it with meat. "And then to Casterly Rock or King's Landing, I think. I have some questions that want answering, concerning a certain dagger."

The sellsword chewed and swallowed. "So you were telling it true? It was not your knife?"

Tyrion smiled thinly. "Do I look a liar to you?"

By the time their bellies were full, the stars had come out and a halfmoon was rising over the mountains. Tyrion spread his shadowskin cloak on the ground and stretched out with his saddle for a pillow. "Our friends are taking their sweet time."

“If I were them, I’d fear a trap,” Bronn said. “Why else would we be so open, if not to lure them in?”

Tyrion chuckled. “Then we ought to sing and send them fleeing in terror.” He began to whistle a tune.

“You’re mad, dwarf,” Bronn said as he cleaned the grease out from under his nails with his dirk.

“Where’s your love of music, Bronn?”

“If it was music you wanted, you should have gotten the singer to champion you.”

Tyrion grinned. “That would have been amusing. I can just see him fending off Ser Vardis with his woodharp.” He resumed his whistling. “Do you know this song?” he asked.

“You hear it here and there, in inns and whorehouses.”

“Myrish. ‘The Seasons of My Love.’ Sweet and sad, if you understand the words. The first girl I ever bedded used to sing it, and I’ve never been able to put it out of my head.” Tyrion gazed up at the sky. It was a clear cold night and the stars shone down upon the mountains as bright and merciless as truth. “I met her on a night like this,” he heard himself saying. “Jaime and I were riding back from Lannisport when we heard a scream, and she came running out into the road with two men dogging her heels, shouting threats. My brother unsheathed his sword and went after them, while I dismounted to protect the girl. She was scarcely a year older than I was, dark-haired, slender, with a face that would break your heart. It certainly broke mine. Lowborn, half-starved, unwashed... yet lovely. They’d torn the rags she was wearing half off her back, so I wrapped her in my cloak while Jaime chased the men into the woods. By the time he came trotting back, I’d gotten a name out of her, and a story. She was a crofter’s child, orphaned when her father died of fever, on her way to... well, nowhere, really.

“Jaime was all in a lather to hunt down the men. It was not often outlaws dared prey on travelers so near to Casterly Rock, and he took it as an insult. The girl was too frightened to send off by herself, though, so I

offered to take her to the closest inn and feed her while my brother rode back to the Rock for help.

“She was hungrier than I would have believed. We finished two whole chickens and part of a third, and drank a flagon of wine, talking. I was only thirteen, and the wine went to my head, I fear. The next thing I knew, I was sharing her bed. If she was shy, I was shyer. I’ll never know where I found the courage. When I broke her maidenhead, she wept, but afterward she kissed me and sang her little song, and by morning I was in love.”

“*You?*” Bronn’s voice was amused.

“Absurd, isn’t it?” Tyrion began to whistle the song again. “I married her,” he finally admitted.

“A Lannister of Casterly Rock wed to a crofter’s daughter,” Bronn said. “How did you manage that?”

“Oh, you’d be astonished at what a boy can make of a few lies, fifty pieces of silver, and a drunken septon. I dared not bring my bride home to Casterly Rock, so I set her up in a cottage of her own, and for a fortnight we played at being man and wife. And then the septon sobered and confessed all to my lord father.” Tyrion was surprised at how desolate it made him feel to say it, even after all these years. Perhaps he was just tired. “That was the end of my marriage.” He sat up and stared at the dying fire, blinking at the light.

“He sent the girl away?”

“He did better than that,” Tyrion said. “First he made my brother tell me the truth. The girl was a whore, you see. Jaime arranged the whole affair, the road, the outlaws, all of it. He thought it was time I had a woman. He paid double for a maiden, knowing it would be my first time.

“After Jaime had made his confession, to drive home the lesson, Lord Tywin brought my wife in and gave her to his guards. They paid her fair enough. A silver for each man, how many whores command that high a price? He sat me down in the corner of the barracks and bade me watch, and at the end she had so many silvers the coins were slipping through her fingers and rolling on the floor, she...” The smoke was stinging his eyes.

Tyrior cleared his throat and turned away from the fire, to gaze out into darkness. "Lord Tywin had me go last," he said in a quiet voice. "And he gave me a gold coin to pay her, because I was a Lannister, and worth more."

After a time he heard the noise again, the rasp of steel on stone as Bronn sharpened his sword. "Thirteen or thirty or three, I would have killed the man who did that to me."

Tyrior swung around to face him. "You may get that chance one day. Remember what I told you. A Lannister always pays his debts." He yawned. "I think I will try and sleep. Wake me if we're about to die."

He rolled himself up in the shadowskin and shut his eyes. The ground was stony and cold, but after a time Tyrior Lannister did sleep. He dreamt of the sky cell. This time he was the gaoler, not the prisoner, *big*, with a strap in his hand, and he was hitting his father, driving him back, toward the abyss...

"*Tyrior.*" Bronn's warning was low and urgent.

Tyrior was awake in the blink of an eye. The fire had burned down to embers, and the shadows were creeping in all around them. Bronn had raised himself to one knee, his sword in one hand and his dirk in the other. Tyrior held up a hand: *stay still*, it said. "Come share our fire, the night is cold," he called out to the creeping shadows. "I fear we've no wine to offer you, but you're welcome to some of our goat."

All movement stopped. Tyrior saw the glint of moonlight on metal. "Our mountain," a voice called out from the trees, deep and hard and unfriendly. "Our goat."

"Your goat," Tyrior agreed. "Who are you?"

"When you meet your gods," a different voice replied, "say it was Gunthor son of Gurn of the Stone Crows who sent you to them." A branch cracked underfoot as he stepped into the light; a thin man in a horned helmet, armed with a long knife.

"And Shagga son of Dolf." That was the first voice, deep and deadly. A boulder shifted to their left, and stood, and became a man. Massive and slow and strong he seemed, dressed all in skins, with a club in his right

hand and an axe in his left. He smashed them together as he lumbered closer.

Other voices called other names, Conn and Torrek and Jaggot and more that Tyrion forgot the instant he heard them; ten at least. A few had swords and knives; others brandished pitchforks and scythes and wooden spears. He waited until they were done shouting out their names before he gave them answer. “I am Tyrion son of Tywin, of the Clan Lannister, the Lions of the Rock. We will gladly pay you for the goat we ate.”

“What do you have to give us, Tyrion son of Tywin?” asked the one who named himself Gunthor, who seemed to be their chief.

“There is silver in my purse,” Tyrion told them. “This hauberk I wear is large for me, but it should fit Conn nicely, and the battle-axe I carry would suit Shagga’s mighty hand far better than that wood-axe he holds.”

“The halfman would pay us with our own coin,” said Conn.

“Conn speaks truly,” Gunthor said. “Your silver is ours. Your horses are ours. Your hauberk and your battle-axe and the knife at your belt, those are ours too. You have nothing to give us but your lives. How would you like to die, Tyrion son of Tywin?”

“In my own bed, with a belly full of wine and a maiden’s mouth around my cock, at the age of eighty,” he replied.

The huge one, Shagga, laughed first and loudest. The others seemed less amused. “Conn, take their horses,” Gunthor commanded. “Kill the other and seize the halfman. He can milk the goats and make the mothers laugh.”

Bronn sprang to his feet. “Who dies first?”

“No!” Tyrion said sharply. “Gunthor son of Gurn, hear me. My House is rich and powerful. If the Stone Crows will see us safely through these mountains, my lord father will shower you with gold.”

“The gold of a lowland lord is as worthless as a halfman’s promises,” Gunthor said.

“Half a man I may be,” Tyrion said, “yet I have the courage to face my enemies. What do the Stone Crows do, but hide behind rocks and shiver

with fear as the knights of the Vale ride by?”

Shagga gave a roar of anger and clashed club against axe. Jaggot poked at Tyrion’s face with the fire-hardened point of a long wooden spear. He did his best not to flinch. “Are these the best weapons you could steal?” he said. “Good enough for killing sheep, perhaps... if the sheep do not fight back. My father’s smiths shit better steel.”

“Little boyman,” Shagga roared, “will you mock my axe after I chop off your manhood and feed it to the goats?”

But Gunthor raised a hand. “No. I would hear his words. The mothers go hungry, and steel fills more mouths than gold. What would you give us for your lives, Tyrion son of Tywin? Swords? Lances? Mail?”

“All that, and more, Gunthor son of Gurn,” Tyrion Lannister replied, smiling. “I will give you the Vale of Arryn.”