

TYRION

He dreamt of his lord father and the Shrouded Lord. He dreamt that they were one and the same, and when his father wrapped stone arms around him and bent to give him his grey kiss, he woke with his mouth dry and rusty with the taste of blood and his heart hammering in his chest.

“Our dead dwarf has returned to us,” Haldon said.

Tyrion shook his head to clear away the webs of dream. *The Sorrows. I was lost in the Sorrows.* “I am not dead.”

“That remains to be seen.” The Halfmaester stood over him. “Duck, be a fine fowl and boil some broth for our little friend here. He must be famished.”

He was on the *Shy Maid*, Tyrion saw, under a scratchy blanket that smelled of vinegar. *The Sorrows are behind us. It was just a dream I dreamed as I was drowning.* “Why do I stink of vinegar?”

“Lemore has been washing you with it. Some say it helps prevent the greyscale. I am inclined to doubt that, but there was no harm in trying. It was Lemore who forced the water from your lungs after Griff had pulled you up. You were as cold as ice, and your lips were blue. Yandry said we ought to throw you back, but the lad forbade it.”

The prince. Memory came rushing back: the stone man reaching out with cracked grey hands, the blood seeping from his knuckles. *He was heavy as a boulder, pulling me under.* “Griff brought me up?” *He must hate me, or he would have let me die.* “How long have I been sleeping? What place is this?”

“Selhorys.” Haldon produced a small knife from his sleeve. “Here,” he said, tossing it underhand at Tyrion.

The dwarf flinched. The knife landed between his feet and stood quivering in the deck. He plucked it out. “What’s this?”

“Take off your boots. Prick each of your toes and fingers.”

“That sounds ... painful.”

“I hope so. Do it.”

Tyrion yanked off one boot and then the other, peeled down his hose, squinted at his toes. It seemed to him they looked no better or worse than usual. He poked gingerly at one big toe.

“Harder,” urged Haldon Halfmaester.

“Do you want me to draw blood?”

“If need be.”

“I’ll have a scab on every toe.”

“The purpose of the exercise is not to count your toes. I want to see you wince. So long as the pricks hurt, you are safe. It is only when you cannot feel the blade that you will have cause to fear.”

Greyscale. Tyrion grimaced. He stabbed another toe, cursed as a bead of blood welled up around the knife’s point. “That hurt. Are you happy?”

“Dancing with joy.”

“Your feet smell worse than mine, Yollo.” Duck had a cup of broth. “Griff warned you not to lay hands upon the stone men.”

“Aye, but he forgot to warn the stone men not to lay their hands upon me.”

“As you prick, look for patches of dead grey skin, for nails beginning to turn black,” said Haldon. “If you see such signs, do not hesitate. Better to lose a toe than a foot. Better to lose an arm than spend your days wailing on the Bridge of Dream. Now the other foot, if you please. Then your fingers.”

The dwarf recrossed his stunted legs and began to prick the other set of toes. “Shall I prick my prick as well?”

“It would not hurt.”

“It would not hurt *you* is what you mean. Though I had as well slice it off for all the use I make of it.”

“Feel free. We will have it tanned and stuffed and sell it for a fortune. A dwarf’s cock has magical powers.”

“I have been telling all the women that for years.” Tyrion drove the dagger’s point into the ball of his thumb, watched the blood bead up, sucked it away. “How long must I continue to torture myself? When will we be certain that I’m clean?”

“Truly?” said the Halfmaester. “Never. You swallowed half the river. You may be going grey even now, turning to stone from inside out, starting with your heart and lungs. If so, pricking your toes and bathing in vinegar will not save you. When you’re done, come have some broth.”

The broth was good, though Tyrion noted that the Halfmaester kept the table between them as he ate. The *Shy Maid* was moored to a weathered pier on the east bank of the Rhoyme. Two piers down, a Volantene river galley was discharging soldiers. Shops and stalls and storehouses huddled beneath a sandstone wall. The towers and domes of the city were visible beyond it, reddened by the light of the setting sun.

No, not a city. Selhorys was still accounted a mere town, and was ruled from Old Volantis. This was not Westeros.

Lemore emerged on deck with the prince in tow. When she saw Tyrion, she rushed across the deck to hug him. “The Mother is merciful. We have prayed for you, Hugor.”

You did, at least. “I won’t hold that against you.”

Young Griff’s greeting was less effusive. The princeling was in a sullen mood, angry that he had been forced to remain on the *Shy Maid* instead of going ashore with Yandry and Ysilla. “We only want to keep you safe,” Lemore told him. “These are unsettled times.”

Haldon Halfmaester explained. “On the way down from the Sorrows to Selhorys, we thrice glimpsed riders moving south along the river’s eastern shore. Dothraki. Once they were so close we could hear the bells tinkling in their braids, and sometimes at night their fires could be seen beyond the eastern hills. We passed warships as well, Volantene river galleys crammed with slave soldiers. The triarchs fear an attack upon Selhorys, plainly.”

Tyrion understood that quick enough. Alone amongst the major river towns, Selhorys stood upon the eastern bank of the Rhoyme, making it much more vulnerable to the horselords than its sister towns across the river. *Even so, it is a small prize. If I were khal, I would feint at Selhorys, let the Volantenes rush to defend it, then swing south and ride hard for Volantis itself.*

“I know how to use a sword,” Young Griff was insisting.

“Even the bravest of your forebears kept his Kingsguard close about him in times of peril.” Lemoire had changed out of her septa’s robes into garb more befitting the wife or daughter of a prosperous merchant. Tyrion watched her closely. He had sniffed out the truth beneath the dyed blue hair of Griff and Young Griff easily enough, and Yandry and Ysilla seemed to be no more than they claimed to be, whilst Duck was somewhat less. Lemoire, though ... *Who is she, really? Why is she here? Not for gold, I’d judge. What is this prince to her? Was she ever a true septa?*

Haldon took note of her change of garb as well. “What are we to make of this sudden loss of faith? I preferred you in your septa’s robes, Lemoire.”

“I preferred her naked,” said Tyrion.

Lemoire gave him a reproachful look. “That is because you have a wicked soul. Septa’s robes scream of Westeros and might draw unwelcome eyes onto us.” She turned back to Prince Aegon. “You are not the only one who must needs hide.”

The lad did not seem appeased. *The perfect prince but still half a boy for all that, with little and less experience of the world and all its woes.* “Prince Aegon,” said Tyrion, “since we’re both stuck aboard this boat, perhaps you will honor me with a game of cyvasse to while away the hours?”

The prince gave him a wary look. “I am sick of *cyvasse*.”

“Sick of losing to a dwarf, you mean?”

That pricked the lad’s pride, just as Tyrion had known it would. “Go fetch the board and pieces. This time I mean to smash you.”

They played on deck, sitting cross-legged behind the cabin. Young Griff arrayed his army for attack, with dragon, elephants, and heavy horse up front. *A young man’s formation, as bold as it is foolish. He risks all for the quick kill.* He let the prince have first move. Haldon stood behind them, watching the play.

When the prince reached for his dragon, Tyrion cleared his throat. “I would not do that if I were you. It is a mistake to bring your dragon out too soon.” He smiled innocently. “Your father knew the dangers of being over-bold.”

“Did you know my true father?”

“Well, I saw him twice or thrice, but I was only ten when Robert killed him, and mine own sire had me hidden underneath a rock. No, I cannot claim I knew Prince Rhaegar. Not as your false father did. Lord Connington was the prince’s dearest friend, was he not?”

Young Griff pushed a lock of blue hair out of his eyes. “They were squires together at King’s Landing.”

“A true friend, our Lord Connington. He must be, to remain so fiercely loyal to the grandson of the king who took his lands and titles and sent him into exile. A pity about that. Elsewise Prince Rhaegar’s friend might have been on hand when my father sacked King’s Landing, to save Prince Rhaegar’s precious little son from getting his royal brains dashed out against a wall.”

The lad flushed. “That was not me. I told you. That was some tanner’s son from Pisswater Bend whose mother died birthing him. His father sold him to Lord Varys for a jug of Arbor gold. He had other sons but had never

tasted Arbor gold. Varys gave the Pisswater boy to my lady mother and carried me away.”

“Aye.” Tyrion moved his elephants. “And when the pisswater prince was safely dead, the eunuch smuggled you across the narrow sea to his fat friend the cheesemonger, who hid you on a poleboat and found an exile lord willing to call himself your father. It does make for a splendid story, and the singers will make much of your escape once you take the Iron Throne ... assuming that our fair Daenerys takes you for her consort.”

“She will. She must.”

“*Must?*” Tyrion made a *tsking* sound. “That is not a word queens like to hear. You are her perfect prince, agreed, bright and bold and comely as any maid could wish. Daenerys Targaryen is no maid, however. She is the widow of a Dothraki khal, a mother of dragons and sacker of cities, Aegon the Conqueror with teats. She may not prove as willing as you wish.”

“She’ll be willing.” Prince Aegon sounded shocked. It was plain that he had never before considered the possibility that his bride-to-be might refuse him. “You don’t know her.” He picked up his heavy horse and put it down with a *thump*.

The dwarf shrugged. “I know that she spent her childhood in exile, impoverished, living on dreams and schemes, running from one city to the next, always fearful, never safe, friendless but for a brother who was by all accounts half-mad ... a brother who sold her maidenhood to the Dothraki for the promise of an army. I know that somewhere out upon the grass her dragons hatched, and so did she. I know she is proud. How not? What else was left her but pride? I know she is strong. How not? The Dothraki despise weakness. If Daenerys had been weak, she would have perished with Viserys. I know she is fierce. Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen are proof enough of that. She has crossed the grasslands and the red waste, survived assassins and conspiracies and fell sorceries, grieved for a brother and a husband and a son, trod the cities of the slavers to dust beneath her dainty sandaled feet. Now, how do you suppose this queen will react when you turn up with your begging bowl in hand and say, ‘Good morrow to you, Auntie. I am your nephew, Aegon, returned from the dead. I’ve been hiding

on a poleboat all my life, but now I've washed the blue dye from my hair and I'd like a dragon, please ... and oh, did I mention, my claim to the Iron Throne is stronger than your own?' "

Aegon's mouth twisted in fury. "I will *not* come to my aunt a beggar. I will come to her a kinsman, with an army."

"A small army." *There, that's made him good and angry.* The dwarf could not help but think of Joffrey. *I have a gift for angering princes.* "Queen Daenerys has a large one, and no thanks to you." Tyrion moved his crossbows.

"Say what you want. She will be my bride, Lord Connington will see to it. I trust him as much as if he were my own blood."

"Perhaps you should be the fool instead of me. *Trust no one*, my prince. Not your chainless maester, not your false father, not the gallant Duck nor the lovely Lemoore nor these other fine friends who grew you from a bean. Above all, trust not the cheesemonger, nor the Spider, nor this little dragon queen you mean to marry. All that mistrust will sour your stomach and keep you awake by night, 'tis true, but better that than the long sleep that does not end." The dwarf pushed his black dragon across a range of mountains. "But what do I know? Your false father is a great lord, and I am just some twisted little monkey man. Still, I'd do things differently."

That got the boy's attention. "How differently?"

"If I were you? I would go west instead of east. Land in Dorne and raise my banners. The Seven Kingdoms will never be more ripe for conquest than they are right now. A boy king sits the Iron Throne. The north is in chaos, the riverlands a devastation, a rebel holds Storm's End and Dragonstone. When winter comes, the realm will starve. And who remains to deal with all of this, who rules the little king who rules the Seven Kingdoms? Why, my own sweet sister. There is no one else. My brother, Jaime, thirsts for battle, not for power. He's run from every chance he's had to rule. My uncle Kevan would make a passably good regent if someone pressed the duty on him, but he will never reach for it. The gods shaped him to be a follower, not a leader." *Well, the gods and my lord father.* "Mace Tyrell would grasp

the sceptre gladly, but mine own kin are not like to step aside and give it to him. And everyone hates Stannis. Who does that leave? Why, only Cersei.

“Westeros is torn and bleeding, and I do not doubt that even now my sweet sister is binding up the wounds ... with salt. Cersei is as gentle as King Maegor, as selfless as Aegon the Unworthy, as wise as Mad Aerys. She never forgets a slight, real or imagined. She takes caution for cowardice and dissent for defiance. And she is greedy. Greedy for power, for honor, for love. Tommen’s rule is bolstered by all of the alliances that my lord father built so carefully, but soon enough she will destroy them, every one. Land and raise your banners, and men will flock to your cause. Lords great and small, and smallfolk too. But do not wait too long, my prince. The moment will not last. The tide that lifts you now will soon recede. Be certain you reach Westeros before my sister falls and someone more competent takes her place.”

“But,” Prince Aegon said, “without Daenerys and her dragons, how could we hope to win?”

“You do not *need* to win,” Tyrion told him. “All you need to do is raise your banners, rally your supporters, and hold, until Daenerys arrives to join her strength to yours.”

“You said she might not have me.”

“Perhaps I overstated. She may take pity on you when you come begging for her hand.” The dwarf shrugged. “Do you want to wager your throne upon a woman’s whim? Go to Westeros, though ... ah, then you are a rebel, not a beggar. Bold, reckless, a true scion of House Targaryen, walking in the footsteps of Aegon the Conqueror. A *dragon*.

“I told you, I know our little queen. Let her hear that her brother Rhaegar’s murdered son is still alive, that this brave boy has raised the dragon standard of her forebears in Westeros once more, that he is fighting a desperate war to avenge his father and reclaim the Iron Throne for House Targaryen, hard-pressed on every side ... and she will fly to your side as fast as wind and water can carry her. You are the last of her line, and this Mother of Dragons, this Breaker of Chains, is above all a *rescuer*. The girl

who drowned the slaver cities in blood rather than leave strangers to their chains can scarcely abandon her own brother's son in his hour of peril. And when she reaches Westeros, and meets you for the first time, you will meet as equals, man and woman, not queen and suppliant. How can she help but love you then, I ask you?" Smiling, he seized his dragon, flew it across the board. "I hope Your Grace will pardon me. Your king is trapped. Death in four."

The prince stared at the playing board. "My dragon—"

"—is too far away to save you. You should have moved her to the center of the battle."

"But you said—"

"I lied. *Trust no one*. And keep your dragon close."

Young Griff jerked to his feet and kicked over the board. *Cyvasse* pieces flew in all directions, bouncing and rolling across the deck of the *Shy Maid*. "Pick those up," the boy commanded.

He may well be a Targaryen after all. "If it please Your Grace." Tyrion got down on his hands and knees and began to crawl about the deck, gathering up pieces.

It was close to dusk when Yandry and Ysilla returned to the *Shy Maid*. A porter trotted at their heels, pushing a wheelbarrow heaped high with provisions: salt and flour, fresh-churned butter, slabs of bacon wrapped in linen, sacks of oranges, apples, and pears. Yandry had a wine cask on one shoulder, while Ysilla had slung a pike over hers. The fish was as large as Tyrion.

When she saw the dwarf standing at the end of the gangplank, Ysilla stopped so suddenly that Yandry blundered into her, and the pike almost slid off her back into the river. Duck helped her rescue it. Ysilla glared at Tyrion and made a peculiar stabbing gesture with three of her fingers. *A sign to ward off evil*. "Let me help you with that fish," he said to Duck.

“No,” Ysilla snapped. “Stay away. Touch no food besides the food you eat yourself.”

The dwarf raised both hands. “As you command.”

Yandry thumped the wine cask down onto the desk. “Where’s Griff?” he demanded of Haldon.

“Asleep.”

“Then rouse him. We have tidings he’d best hear. The queen’s name is on every tongue in Selhorys. They say she still sits in Meereen, sore beset. If the talk in the markets can be believed, Old Volantis will soon join the war against her.”

Haldon pursed his lips. “The gossip of fishmongers is not to be relied on. Still, I suppose Griff will want to hear. You know how he is.” The Halfmaester went below.

The girl never started for the west. No doubt she had good reasons. Between Meereen and Volantis lay five hundred leagues of deserts, mountains, swamps, and ruins, plus Mantarys with its sinister reputation. A city of monsters, they say, but if she marches overland, where else is she to turn for food and water? The sea would be swifter, but if she does not have the ships ...

By the time Griff appeared on deck, the pike was spitting and sizzling over the brazier whilst Ysilla hovered over it with a lemon, squeezing. The sellsword wore his mail and wolfskin cloak, soft leather gloves, dark woolen breeches. If he was surprised to see Tyrion awake, he gave no sign beyond his customary scowl. He took Yandry back to the tiller, where they spoke in low voices, too quietly for the dwarf to hear.

Finally Griff beckoned to Haldon. “We need to know the truth of these rumors. Go ashore and learn what you can. Qavo will know, if you can find him. Try the Riverman and the Painted Turtle. You know his other places.”

“Aye. I’ll take the dwarf as well. Four ears hear more than two. And you know how Qavo is about his *cyvasse*.”

“As you wish. Be back before the sun comes up. If for any reason you’re delayed, make your way to the Golden Company.”

Spoken like a lord. Tyrion kept the thought to himself.

Haldon donned a hooded cloak, and Tyrion shed his homemade motley for something drab and grey. Griff allowed them each a purse of silver from Illyrio’s chests. “To loosen tongues.”

Dusk was giving way to darkness as they made their way along the riverfront. Some of the ships they passed appeared deserted, their gangplanks drawn up. Others crawled with armed men who eyed them with suspicion. Under the town walls, parchment lanterns had been lit above the stalls, throwing pools of colored light upon the cobbled path. Tyrion watched as Haldon’s face turned green, then red, then purple. Under the cacophony of foreign tongues, he heard queer music playing from somewhere up ahead, a thin high fluting accompanied by drums. A dog was barking too, behind them.

And the whores were out. River or sea, a port was a port, and wherever you found sailors, you’d find whores. *Is that what my father meant? Is that where whores go, to the sea?*

The whores of Lannisport and King’s Landing were free women. Their sisters of Selhorys were slaves, their bondage indicated by the tears tattooed beneath their right eyes. *Old as sin and twice as ugly, the lot of them.* It was almost enough to put a man off whoring. Tyrion felt their eyes upon them as he waddled by, and heard them whispering to one another and giggling behind their hands. *You would think they had never seen a dwarf before.*

A squad of Volantene spearmen stood guard at the river gate. Torch-light gleamed off the steel claws that jutted from their gauntlets. Their helms were tiger’s masks, the faces beneath marked by green stripes tattooed across both cheeks. The slave soldiers of Volantis were fiercely proud of their tiger stripes, Tyrion knew. *Do they yearn for freedom?* he wondered.

What would they do if this child queen bestowed it on them? What are they, if not tigers? What am I, if not a lion?

One of the tigers spied the dwarf and said something that made the others laugh. As they reached the gate, he pulled off his clawed gauntlet and the sweaty glove beneath, locked one arm around the dwarf's neck, and roughly rubbed his head. Tyrion was too startled to resist. It was all over in a heartbeat. "Was there some reason for that?" he demanded of the Halfmaester.

"He says that it is good luck to rub the head of a dwarf," Haldon said after an exchange with the guard in his own tongue.

Tyrion forced himself to smile at the man. "Tell him that it is even better luck to suck on a dwarf's cock."

"Best not. Tigers have been known to have sharp teeth."

A different guard motioned them through the gate, waving a torch at them impatiently. Haldon Halfmaester led the way into Selhorys proper, with Tyrion waddling warily at his heels.

A great square opened up before them. Even at this hour, it was crowded and noisy and ablaze with light. Lanterns swung from iron chains above the doors of inns and pleasure houses, but within the gates, they were made of colored glass, not parchment. To their right a nightfire burned outside a temple of red stone. A priest in scarlet robes stood on the temple balcony, haranguing the small crowd that had gathered around the flames.

Elsewhere, travelers sat playing *cyvasse* in front of an inn, drunken soldiers wandered in and out of what was obviously a brothel, a woman beat a mule outside a stable. A two-wheeled cart went rumbling past them, pulled by a white dwarf elephant. *This is another world*, thought Tyrion, *but not so different from the world I know*.

The square was dominated by a white marble statue of a headless man in impossibly ornate armor, astride a warhorse similarly arrayed. "Who might that be?" wondered Tyrion.

“Triarch Horonno. A Volantene hero from the Century of Blood. He was returned as triarch every year for forty years, until he wearied of elections and declared himself triarch for life. The Volantenes were not amused. He was put to death soon after. Tied between two elephants and torn in half.”

“His statue seems to lack a head.”

“He was a tiger. When the elephants came to power, their followers went on a rampage, knocking the heads from the statues of those they blamed for all the wars and deaths.” He shrugged. “That was another age. Come, we’d best hear what that priest is going on about. I swear I heard the name Daenerys.”

Across the square they joined the growing throng outside the red temple. With the locals towering above him on every hand, the little man found it hard to see much beyond their arses. He could hear most every word the priest was saying, but that was not to say he understood them. “Do you understand what he is saying?” he asked Haldon in the Common Tongue.

“I would if I did not have a dwarf piping in my ear.”

“I do not *pipe*.” Tyrion crossed his arms and looked behind him, studying the faces of the men and women who had stopped to listen. Everywhere he turned, he saw tattoos. *Slaves. Four of every five of them are slaves.*

“The priest is calling on the Volantenes to go to war,” the Halfmaester told him, “but on the side of right, as soldiers of the Lord of Light, R’hllor who made the sun and stars and fights eternally against the darkness. Nyessos and Malaquo have turned away from the light, he says, their hearts darkened by the yellow harpies from the east. He says ...”

“*Dragons*. I understood that word. He said *dragons*.”

“Aye. The dragons have come to carry her to glory.”

“Her. Daenerys?”

Haldon nodded. “Benerro has sent forth the word from Volantis. Her coming is the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. From smoke and salt was she born to make the world anew. She is Azor Ahai returned ... and her triumph over darkness will bring a summer that will never end ... death itself will bend its knee, and all those who die fighting in her cause shall be reborn ...”

“Do I have to be reborn in this same body?” asked Tyrion. The crowd was growing thicker. He could feel them pressing in around them. “Who is Benerro?”

Haldon raised an eyebrow. “High Priest of the red temple in Volantis. Flame of Truth, Light of Wisdom, First Servant of the Lord of Light, Slave of R’hllor.”

The only red priest Tyrion had ever known was Thoros of Myr, the portly, genial, wine-stained roisterer who had loitered about Robert’s court swilling the king’s finest vintages and setting his sword on fire for *mêlées*. “Give me priests who are fat and corrupt and cynical,” he told Haldon, “the sort who like to sit on soft satin cushions, nibble sweetmeats, and diddle little boys. It’s the ones who believe in gods who make the trouble.”

“It may be that we can use this trouble to our advantage. I know where we may find answers.” Haldon led them past the headless hero to where a big stone inn fronted on the square. The ridged shell of some immense turtle hung above its door, painted in garish colors. Inside a hundred dim red candles burned like distant stars. The air was fragrant with the smell of roasted meat and spices, and a slave girl with a turtle on one cheek was pouring pale green wine.

Haldon paused in the doorway. “There. Those two.”

In the alcove two men sat over a carved stone *cyvasse* table, squinting at their pieces by the light of a red candle. One was gaunt and sallow, with thinning black hair and a blade of a nose. The other was wide of shoulder and round of belly, with corkscrew ringlets tumbling past his collar. Neither deigned to look up from their game until Haldon drew up a chair between them and said, “My dwarf plays better *cyvasse* than both of you combined.”

The bigger man raised his eyes to gaze at the intruders in distaste and said something in the tongue of Old Volantis, too fast for Tyrion to hope to follow. The thinner one leaned back in his chair. "Is he for sale?" he asked in the Common Tongue of Westeros. "The triarch's grotesquerie is in need of a *cyvasse*-playing dwarf."

"Yollo is no slave."

"What a pity." The thin man shifted an onyx elephant.

Across the *cyvasse* table, the man behind the alabaster army pursed his lips in disapproval. He moved his heavy horse.

"A blunder," said Tyrion. He had as well play his part. "Just so," the thin man said. He answered with his own heavy horse. A flurry of quick moves followed, until finally the thin man smiled and said, "Death, my friend."

The big man glowered at the board, then rose and growled something in his own tongue. His opponent laughed. "Come now. The dwarf does not stink as bad as that." He beckoned Tyrion toward the empty chair. "Up with you, little man. Put your silver on the table, and we will see how well you play the game."

Which game? Tyrion might have asked. He climbed onto the chair. "I play better with a full belly and a cup of wine to hand." The thin man turned obligingly and called for the slave girl to fetch them food and drink.

Haldon said, "The noble Qavo Nogarys is the customs officer here in Selhorys. I have never once defeated him at *cyvasse*."

Tyrion understood. "Perhaps I will be more fortunate." He opened his purse and stacked silver coins beside the board, one atop another until finally Qavo smiled.

As each of them was setting up his pieces behind the *cyvasse* screen, Haldon said, "What news from downriver? Will it be war?"

Qavo shrugged. “The Yunkai’i would have it so. They style themselves the Wise Masters. Of their wisdom I cannot speak, but they do not lack for cunning. Their envoy came to us with chests of gold and gems and two hundred slaves, nubile girls and smooth-skinned boys trained in the way of the seven sighs. I am told his feasts are memorable and his bribes lavish.”

“The Yunkishmen have bought your triarchs?”

“Only Nyessos.” Qavo removed the screen and studied the placement of Tyrion’s army. “Malaquo may be old and toothless, but he is a tiger still, and Doniphos will not be returned as triarch. The city thirsts for war.”

“Why?” wondered Tyrion. “Meereen is long leagues across the sea. How has this sweet child queen offended Old Volantis?”

“Sweet?” Qavo laughed. “If even half the stories coming back from Slaver’s Bay are true, this *child* is a monster. They say that she is blood-thirsty, that those who speak against her are impaled on spikes to die lingering deaths. They say she is a sorceress who feeds her dragons on the flesh of newborn babes, an oathbreaker who mocks the gods, breaks truces, threatens envoys, and turns on those who have served her loyally. They say her lust cannot be sated, that she mates with men, women, eunuchs, even dogs and children, and woe betide the lover who fails to satisfy her. She gives her body to men to take their souls in thrall.”

Oh, good, thought Tyrion. *If she gives her body to me, she is welcome to my soul, small and stunted though it is.*

“They say,” said Haldon. “By *they*, you mean the slavers, the exiles she drove from Astapor and Meereen. Mere calumnies.”

“The best calumnies are spiced with truth,” suggested Qavo, “but the girl’s true sin cannot be denied. This arrogant child has taken it upon herself to smash the slave trade, but that traffic was never confined to Slaver’s Bay. It was part of the sea of trade that spanned the world, and the dragon queen has clouded the water. Behind the Black Wall, lords of ancient blood sleep poorly, listening as their kitchen slaves sharpen their long knives. Slaves grow our food, clean our streets, teach our young. They guard our walls,

row our galleys, fight our battles. And now when they look east, they see this young queen shining from afar, this *breaker of chains*. The Old Blood cannot suffer that. Poor men hate her too. Even the vilest beggar stands higher than a slave. This dragon queen would rob him of that consolation.”

Tyrion advanced his spearmen. Qavo replied with his light horse. Tyrion moved his crossbowmen up a square and said, “The red priest outside seemed to think Volantis should fight for this silver queen, not against her.”

“The red priests would be wise to hold their tongues,” said Qavo Nogarys. “Already there has been fighting between their followers and those who worship other gods. Benerro’s rantings will only serve to bring a savage wrath down upon his head.”

“What rantings?” the dwarf asked, toying with his rabble.

The Volantene waved a hand. “In Volantis, thousands of slaves and freedmen crowd the temple plaza every night to hear Benerro shriek of bleeding stars and a sword of fire that will cleanse the world. He has been preaching that Volantis will surely burn if the triarchs take up arms against the silver queen.”

“That’s a prophecy even I could make. Ah, supper.”

Supper was a plate of roasted goat served on a bed of sliced onions. The meat was spiced and fragrant, charred outside and red and juicy within. Tyrion plucked at a piece. It was so hot it burned his fingers, but so good he could not help but reach for another chunk. He washed it down with the pale green Volantene liquor, the closest thing he’d had to wine for ages. “Very good,” he said, plucking up his dragon. “The most powerful piece in the game,” he announced, as he removed one of Qavo’s elephants. “And Daenerys Targaryen has three, it’s said.”

“Three,” Qavo allowed, “against thrice three thousand enemies. Grazdan mo Eraz was not the only envoy sent out from the Yellow City. When the Wise Masters move against Meereen, the legions of New Ghis will fight beside them. Tolosi. Elyrians. Even the Dothraki.”

“You have Dothraki outside your own gates,” Haldon said. “Khal Pono.” Qavo waved a pale hand in dismissal. “The horselords come, we give them gifts, the horselords go.” He moved his catapult again, closed his hand around Tyrion’s alabaster dragon, removed it from the board.

The rest was slaughter, though the dwarf held on another dozen moves. “The time has come for bitter tears,” Qavo said at last, scooping up the pile of silver. “Another game?”

“No need,” said Haldon. “My dwarf has had his lesson in humility. I think it is best we get back to our boat.”

Outside in the square, the nightfire was still burning, but the priest was gone and the crowd was long dispersed. The glow of candles glimmered from the windows of the brothel. From inside came the sound of women’s laughter. “The night is still young,” said Tyrion. “Qavo may not have told us everything. And whores hear much and more from the men they service.”

“Do you need a woman so badly, Yollo?”

“A man grows weary of having no lovers but his fingers.” *Selhorys may be where whores go. Tysha might be in there even now, with tears tattooed upon her cheek.* “I almost drowned. A man needs a woman after that. Besides, I need to make sure my prick hasn’t turned to stone.”

The Halfmaester laughed. “I will wait for you in the tavern by the gate. Do not be too long about your business.”

“Oh, have no fear on that count. Most women prefer to be done with me as quickly as they can.”

The brothel was a modest one compared to those the dwarf had been wont to frequent in Lannisport and King’s Landing. The proprietor did not seem to speak any tongue but that of Volantis, but he understood the *clank* of silver well enough and led Tyrion through an archway into a long room that smelled of incense, where four bored slave girls were lounging about in various states of undress. Two had seen at least forty namedays come and go, he guessed; the youngest was perhaps fifteen or sixteen. None was as

hideous as the whores he'd seen working the docks, though they fell well short of beauty. One was plainly pregnant. Another was just fat, and sported iron rings in both her nipples. All four had tears tattooed beneath one eye.

"Do you have a girl who speaks the tongue of Westeros?" asked Tyrion. The proprietor squinted, uncomprehending, so he repeated the question in High Valyrian. This time the man seemed to grasp a word or three and replied in Volantene. "Sunset girl" was all the dwarf could get out of his answer. He took that to mean a girl from the Sunset Kingdoms.

There was only one such in the house, and she was not Tysha. She had freckled cheeks and tight red curls upon her head, which gave promise of freckled breasts and red hair between her legs. "She'll do," said Tyrion, "and I'll have a flagon too. Red wine with red flesh." The whore was looking at his noseless face with revulsion in her eyes. "Do I offend you, sweet-ling? I am an offensive creature, as my father would be glad to tell you if he were not dead and rotting."

Though she did look Westerosi, the girl spoke not a word of the Common Tongue. *Perhaps she was captured by some slaver as a child.* Her bedchamber was small, but there was a Myrish carpet on the floor and a mattress stuffed with feathers in place of straw. *I have seen worse.* "Will you give me your name?" he asked, as he took a cup of wine from her. "No?" The wine was strong and sour and required no translation. "I suppose I shall settle for your cunt." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Have you ever bedded a monster before? Now's as good a time as any. Out of your clothes and onto your back, if it please you. Or not."

She looked at him uncomprehending, until he took the flagon from her hands and lifted her skirts up over her head. After that she understood what was required of her, though she did not prove the liveliest of partners. Tyrion had been so long without a woman that he spent himself inside her on the third thrust.

He rolled off feeling more ashamed than sated. *This was a mistake. What a wretched creature I've become.* "Do you know a woman by the name of Tysha?" he asked, as he watched his seed dribble out of her onto the bed. The whore did not respond. "Do you know where whores go?" She did not

answer that one either. Her back was crisscrossed by ridges of scar tissue. *This girl is as good as dead. I have just fucked a corpse.* Even her eyes looked dead. *She does not even have the strength to loathe me.*

He needed wine. A lot of wine. He seized the flagon with both hands and raised it to his lips. The wine ran red. Down his throat, down his chin. It dripped from his beard and soaked the feather bed. In the candlelight it looked as dark as the wine that had poisoned Joffrey. When he was done he tossed the empty flagon aside and half-rolled and half-staggered to the floor, groping for a chamber pot. There was none to be found. His stomach heaved, and he found himself on his knees, retching on the carpet, that wonderful thick Myrish carpet, as comforting as lies.

The whore cried out in distress. *They will blame her for this*, he realized, ashamed. “Cut off my head and take it to King’s Landing,” Tyrion urged her. “My sister will make a lady of you, and no one will ever whip you again.” She did not understand that either, so he shoved her legs apart, crawled between them, and took her once more. That much she could comprehend, at least.

Afterward the wine was done and so was he, so he wadded up the girl’s clothing and tossed it at the door. She took the hint and fled, leaving him alone in the darkness, sinking deeper into his feather bed. *I am stinking drunk.* He dare not close his eyes, for fear of sleep. Beyond the veil of dream, the Sorrows were waiting for him. Stone steps ascending endlessly, steep and slick and treacherous, and somewhere at the top, the Shrouded Lord. *I do not want to meet the Shrouded Lord.* Tyrion fumbled back into his clothes again and groped his way to the stair. *Griff will flay me. Well, why not? If ever a dwarf deserved a skinning, I’m him.*

Halfway down the steps, he lost his footing. Somehow he managed to break his tumble with his hands and turn it into a clumsy thumping cartwheel. The whores in the room below looked up in astonishment when he landed at the foot of the steps. Tyrion rolled onto his feet and gave them a bow. “I am more agile when I’m drunk.” He turned to the proprietor. “I fear I ruined your carpet. The girl’s not to blame. Let me pay.” He pulled out a fistful of coins and tossed them at the man.

“*Imp*,” a deep voice said, behind him.

In the corner of the room, a man sat in a pool of shadow, with a whore squirming on his lap. *I never saw that girl. If I had, I would have taken her upstairs instead of freckles.* She was younger than the others, slim and pretty, with long silvery hair. Lyseni, at a guess ... but the man whose lap she filled was from the Seven Kingdoms. Burly and broad-shouldered, forty if he was a day, and maybe older. Half his head was bald, but coarse stubble covered his cheeks and chin, and hair grew thickly down his arms, sprouting even from his knuckles.

Tyrion did not like the look of him. He liked the big black bear on his surcoat even less. *Wool. He's wearing wool, in this heat. Who else but a knight would be so fucking mad?* “How pleasant to hear the Common Tongue so far from home,” he made himself say, “but I fear you have mistaken me. My name is Hugor Hill. May I buy you a cup of wine, my friend?”

“I’ve drunk enough.” The knight shoved his whore aside and got to his feet. His sword belt hung on a peg beside him. He took it down and drew his blade. Steel whispered against leather. The whores were watching avidly, candlelight shining in their eyes. The proprietor had vanished. “You’re mine, *Hugor*.”

Tyrion could no more outrun him than outfight him. Drunk as he was, he could not even hope to outwit him. He spread his hands. “And what do you mean to do with me?”

“Deliver you,” the knight said, “to the queen.”