

TYRION

Vrys stood over the brazier, warming his soft hands. “It would appear Renly was murdered most fearfully in the very midst of his army. His throat was opened from ear to ear by a blade that passed through steel and bone as if they were soft cheese.”

“Murdered by whose hand?” Cersei demanded.

“Have you ever considered that too many answers are the same as no answer at all? My informers are not always as highly placed as we might like. When a king dies, fancies sprout like mushrooms in the dark. A groom says that Renly was slain by a knight of his own Rainbow Guard. A washerwoman claims Stannis stole through the heart of his brother’s army with his magic sword. Several men-at-arms believe a woman did the fell deed, but cannot agree on *which* woman. A maid that Renly had spurned, claims one. A camp follower brought in to serve his pleasure on the eve of battle, says a second. The third ventures that it might have been the Lady Catelyn Stark.”

The queen was not pleased. “Must you waste our time with every rumor the fools care to tell?”

“You pay me well for these rumors, my gracious queen.”

“We pay you for the truth, Lord Varys. Remember that, or this small council may grow smaller still.”

Varys tittered nervously. “You and your noble brother will leave His Grace with no council at all if you continue.”

“I daresay, the realm could survive a few less councillors,” said Littlefinger with a smile.

“Dear dear Petyr,” said Varys, “are you not concerned that yours might be the next name on the Hand’s little list?”

“Before you, Varys? I should never dream of it.”

“Mayhaps we will be brothers on the Wall together, you and I.” Varys giggled again.

“Sooner than you’d like, if the next words out of your mouth are not something useful, eunuch.” From the look of her eyes, Cersei was prepared to castrate Varys all over again.

“Might this be some ruse?” asked Littlefinger.

“If so, it is a ruse of surpassing cleverness,” said Varys. “It has certainly hoodwinked me.”

Tyrion had heard enough. “Joff will be so disappointed,” he said. “He was saving such a nice spike for Renly’s head. But whoever did the deed, we must assume Stannis was behind it. The gain is clearly his.” He did not like this news; he had counted on the brothers Baratheon decimating each other in bloody battle. He could feel his elbow throbbing where the morningstar had laid it open. It did that sometimes in the damp. He squeezed it uselessly in his hand and asked, “What of Renly’s host?”

“The greater part of his foot remains at Bitterbridge.” Varys abandoned the brazier to take his seat at the table. “Most of the lords who rode with Lord Renly to Storm’s End have gone over banner-and-blade to Stannis, with all their chivalry.”

“Led by the Florents, I’d wager,” said Littlefinger.

Varys gave him a simpering smile. “You would win, my lord. Lord Alester was indeed the first to bend the knee. Many others followed.”

“Many,” Tyrion said pointedly, “but not all?”

“Not all,” agreed the eunuch. “Not Loras Tyrell, nor Randyll Tarly, nor Mathis Rowan. And Storm’s End itself has not yielded. Ser Cortnay Penrose holds the castle in Renly’s name, and will not believe his liege is dead. He demands to see the mortal remains before he opens his gates, but it seems that Renly’s corpse has unaccountably vanished. Carried away, most likely. A fifth of Renly’s knights departed with Ser Loras rather than bend the knee to Stannis. It’s said the Knight of Flowers went mad when he saw his king’s body, and slew three of Renly’s guards in his wrath, among them Emmon Cuy and Robar Royce.”

A pity he stopped at three, thought Tyrion.

“Ser Loras is likely making for Bitterbridge,” Varys went on. “His sister is there, Renly’s queen, as well as a great many soldiers who suddenly find themselves kingless. Which side will they take now? A ticklish question. Many serve the lords who remained at Storm’s End, and those lords now belong to Stannis.”

Tyrion leaned forward. “There is a chance here, it seems to me. Win Loras Tyrell to our cause and Lord Mace Tyrell and his bannermen might join us as well. They may have sworn their swords to Stannis for the moment, yet they cannot love the man, or they would have been his from the start.”

“Is their love for us any greater?” asked Cersei.

“Scarcely,” said Tyrion. “They loved Renly, clearly, but Renly is slain. Perhaps we can give them good and sufficient reasons to prefer Joffrey to Stannis... *if* we move quickly.”

“What sort of reasons do you mean to give them?”

“Gold reasons,” Littlefinger suggested at once.

Varys made a *tsking* sound. “Sweet Petyr, surely you do not mean to suggest that these puissant lords and noble knights could be *bought* like so many chickens in the market.”

“Have you been to our markets of late, Lord Varys?” asked Littlefinger. “You’d find it easier to buy a lord than a chicken, I daresay. Of course, lords cluck prouder than chickens, and take it ill if you offer them coin like a tradesman, but they are seldom adverse to taking gifts... honors, lands, castles...”

“Bribes might sway some of the lesser lords,” Tyrion said, “but never Highgarden.”

“True,” Littlefinger admitted. “The Knight of Flowers is the key there. Mace Tyrell has two older sons, but Loras has always been his favorite. Win him, and Highgarden will be yours.”

Yes, Tyrion thought. “It seems to me we should take a lesson from the late Lord Renly. We can win the Tyrell alliance as he did. With a marriage.”

Varys understood the quickest. “You think to wed King Joffrey to Margaery Tyrell.”

“I do.” Renly’s young queen was no more than fifteen, sixteen, he seemed to recall... older than Joffrey, but a few years were nothing, it was so neat and sweet he could taste it.

“Joffrey is betrothed to Sansa Stark,” Cersei objected.

“Marriage contracts can be broken. What advantage is there in wedding the king to the daughter of a dead traitor?”

Littlefinger spoke up. “You might point out to His Grace that the Tyrells are much wealthier than the Starks, and that Margaery is said to be lovely... and beddable besides.”

“Yes,” said Tyrion, “Joff ought to like that well enough.”

“My son is too young to care about such things.”

“You think so?” asked Tyrion. “He’s thirteen, Cersei. The same age at which I married.”

“You shamed us all with that sorry episode. Joffrey is made of finer stuff.”

“So fine that he had Ser Boros rip off Sansa’s gown.”

“He was angry with the girl.”

“He was angry with that cook’s boy who spilled the soup last night as well, but he didn’t strip him naked.”

“This was not a matter of some spilled soup—”

No, it was a matter of some pretty teats. After that business in the yard, Tyrion had spoken with Varys about how they might arrange for Joffrey to visit Chataya’s. A taste of honey might sweeten the boy, he hoped. He might even be *grateful*, gods forbid, and Tyrion could do with a shade more gratitude from his sovereign. It would need to be done secretly, of course. The tricky bit would be parting him from the Hound. “The dog is never far from his master’s heels,” he’d observed to Varys, “but all men sleep. And some gamble and whore and visit winesinks as well.”

“The Hound does all these things, if that is your question.”

“No,” said Tyrion. “My question is *when*.”

Varys had laid a finger on his cheek, smiling enigmatically. “My lord, a suspicious man might think you wished to find a time when Sandor Clegane was not protecting King Joffrey, the better to do the boy some harm.”

“Surely you know me better than that, Lord Varys,” Tyrion said. “Why, all I want is for Joffrey to love me.”

The eunuch had promised to look into the matter. The war made its own demands, though; Joffrey’s initiation into manhood would need to wait. “Doubtless you know your son better than I do,” he made himself tell Cersei, “but regardless, there’s still much to be said for a Tyrell marriage. It may be the only way that Joffrey lives long enough to reach his wedding night.”

Littlefinger agreed. “The Stark girl brings Joffrey nothing but her body, sweet as that may be. Margaery Tyrell brings fifty thousand swords and all the strength of Highgarden.”

“Indeed.” Varys laid a soft hand on the queen’s sleeve. “You have a mother’s heart, and I know His Grace loves his little sweetling. Yet kings must learn to put the needs of the realm before their own desires. I say this offer must be made.”

The queen pulled free of the eunuch’s touch. “You would not speak so if you were women. Say what you will, my lords, but Joffrey is too proud to settle for Renly’s leavings. He will never consent.”

Tyrion shrugged. “When the king comes of age in three years, he may give or withhold his consent as he pleases. Until then, you are his regent and I am his Hand, and he will marry whomever we tell him to marry. Leavings or no.”

Cersei’s quiver was empty. “Make your offer then, but gods save you all if Joff does not like this girl.”

“I’m so pleased we can agree,” Tyrion said. “Now, which of us shall go to Bitterbridge? We must reach Ser Loras with our offer before his blood can cool.”

“You mean to send one of the council?”

“I can scarcely expect the Knight of Flowers to treat with Bronn or Shagga, can I? The Tyrells are proud.”

His sister wasted no time trying to twist the situation to her advantage. “Ser Jacelyn Bywater is nobly born. Send him.”

Tyrion shook his head. “We need someone who can do more than repeat our words and fetch back a reply. Our envoy must speak for king and council and settle the matter quickly.”

“The Hand speaks with the king’s voice.” Candlelight gleamed green as wildfire in Cersei’s eyes. “If we send you, Tyrion, it will be as if Joffrey went himself. And who better, You wield words as skillfully as Jaime wields a sword.”

Are you that eager to get me out of the city, Cersei? “You are too kind, sister, but it seems to me that a boy’s mother is better fitted to arrange his marriage than any uncle. And you have a gift for winning friends that I could never hope to match.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Joff needs me at his side.”

“Your Grace, my lord Hand,” said Littlefinger, “the king needs both of you here. Let me go in your stead.”

“You?” *What gain does he see in this?* Tyrion wondered.

“I am of the king’s council, yet not the king’s blood, so I would make a poor hostage. I knew Ser Loras passing well when he was here at court, and gave him no cause to dislike me. Mace Tyrell bears me no enmity that I know of, and I flatter myself that I am not unskilled in negotiation.”

He has us. Tyrion did not trust Petyr Baelish, nor did he want the man out of his sight, yet what other choice was left him? It must be Littlefinger or Tyrion himself, and he knew full well that if he left King’s Landing for any length of time, all that he had managed to accomplish would be undone. “There is fighting between here and Bitterbridge,” he said cautiously. “And you can be past certain that Lord Stannis will be dispatching his own shepherds to gather in his brother’s wayward lambs.”

“I’ve never been frightened of shepherds. It’s the sheep who trouble me. Still, I suppose an escort might be in order.”

“I can spare a hundred gold cloaks,” Tyrion said.

“Five hundred.”

“Three hundred.”

“And forty more—twenty knights with as many squires. If I arrive without a knightly tail, the Tyrells will think me of small account.”

That was true enough. “Agreed.”

“I’ll include Horror and Slobber in my party, and send them on to their lord father afterward. A gesture of goodwill. We need Paxter Redwyne, he’s Mace Tyrell’s oldest friend, and a great power in his own right.”

“And a traitor,” the queen said, balking. “The Arbor would have declared for Renly with all the rest, except that Redwyne knew full well his whelps would suffer for it.”

“Renly is dead, Your Grace,” Littlefinger pointed out, “and neither Stannis nor Lord Paxter will have forgotten how Redwyne galleys closed the sea during the siege of Storm’s End. Restore the twins and perchance we may win Redwyne’s love.”

Cersei remained unconvinced. “The Others can keep his love, I want his swords and sails. Holding tight to those twins is the best way to make certain that we’ll have them.”

Tyrion had the answer. “Then let us send Ser Hobber back to the Arbor and keep Ser Horas here. Lord Paxter ought to be clever enough to riddle out the meaning of that, I should think.”

The suggestion was carried without protest, but Littlefinger was not done. “We’ll want horses. Swift and strong. The fighting will make remounts hard to come by. A goodly supply of gold will also be needed, for those gifts we spoke of earlier.”

“Take as much as you require. If the city falls, Stannis will steal it all anyway.”

“I’ll want my commission in writing. A document that will leave Mace Tyrell in no doubt as to my authority, granting me full power to treat with him concerning this match and any other arrangements that might be

required, and to make binding pledges in the king's name. It should be signed by Joffrey and every member of this council, and bear all our seals."

Tyrian shifted uncomfortably. "Done. Will that be all? I remind you, there's a long road between here and Bitterbridge."

"I'll be riding it before dawn breaks." Littlefinger rose. "I trust that on my return, the king will see that I am suitably rewarded for my valiant efforts in his cause?"

Varys giggled. "Joffrey is such a grateful sovereign, I'm certain you will have no cause to complain, my good brave lord."

The queen was more direct. "What do you want, Petyr?"

Littlefinger glanced at Tyrian with a sly smile. "I shall need to give that some consideration. No doubt I'll think of something." He sketched an airy bow and took his leave, as casual as if he were off to one of his brothels.

Tyrian glanced out the window. The fog was so thick that he could not even see the curtain wall across the yard. A few dim lights shone indistinct through that greyness. *A foul day for travel*, he thought. He did not envy Petyr Baelish. "We had best see to drawing up those documents. Lord Varys, send for parchment and quill. And someone will need to wake Joffrey."

It was still grey and dark when the meeting finally ended. Varys scurried off alone, his soft slippers whisking along the floor. The Lannisters lingered a moment by the door. "How comes your chain, brother?" the queen asked as Ser Preston fastened a vair-lined cloth-of-silver cloak about her shoulders.

"Link by link, it grows longer. We should thank the gods that Ser Cortnay Penrose is as stubborn as he is. Stannis will never march north with Storm's End untaken in his rear."

"Tyrian, I know we do not always agree on policy, but it seems to me that I was wrong about you. You are not so big a fool as I imagined. In truth, I realize now that you have been a great help. For that I thank you. You must forgive me if I have spoken to you harshly in the past."

“Must I?” He gave her a shrug, a smile. “Sweet sister, you have said nothing that requires forgiveness.”

“Today, you mean?” They both laughed... and Cersei leaned over and planted a quick, soft kiss on his brow.

Too astonished for words, Tyrion could only watch her stride off down the hall, Ser Preston at her side. “Have I lost my wits, or did my sister just kiss me?” he asked Bronn when she was gone.

“Was it so sweet?”

“It was... unanticipated.” Cersei had been behaving queerly of late. Tyrion found it very unsettling. “I am trying to recall the last time she kissed me. I could not have been more than six or seven. Jaime had dared her to do it.”

“The woman’s finally taken note of your charms.”

“No,” Tyrion said. “No, the woman is hatching something. Best find out what, Bronn. You know I hate surprises.”