

## TYRION

Chella daughter of Cheyk of the Black Ears had gone ahead to scout, and it was she who brought back word of the army at the crossroads. “By their fires I call them twenty thousand strong,” she said. “Their banners are red, with a golden lion.”

“Your father?” Bronn asked.

“Or my brother Jaime,” Tyrion said. “We shall know soon enough.” He surveyed his ragged band of brigands: near three hundred Stone Crows, Moon Brothers, Black Ears, and Burned Men, and those just the seed of the army he hoped to grow. Gunthor son of Gurn was raising the other clans even now. He wondered what his lord father would make of them in their skins and bits of stolen steel. If truth be told, he did not know what to make of them himself. Was he their commander or their captive? Most of the time, it seemed to be a little of both. “It might be best if I rode down alone,” he suggested.

“Best for Tyrion son of Tywin,” said Ulf, who spoke for the Moon Brothers.

Shagga glowered, a fearsome sight to see. “Shagga son of Dolf likes this not. Shagga will go with the boyman, and if the boyman lies, Shagga will chop off his manhood—”

“—and feed it to the goats, yes,” Tyrion said wearily. “Shagga, I give you my word as a Lannister, I will return.”

“Why should we trust your word?” Chella was a small hard woman, flat as a boy, and no fool. “Lowland lords have lied to the clans before.”

“You wound me, Chella,” Tyrion said. “Here I thought we had become such friends. But as you will. You shall ride with me, and Shagga and Conn for the Stone Crows, Ulf for the Moon Brothers, and Timett son of Timett for the Burned Men.” The clansmen exchanged wary looks as he named them. “The rest shall wait here until I send for you. *Try* not to kill and maim each other while I’m gone.”

He put his heels to his horse and trotted off, giving them no choice but to follow or be left behind. Either was fine with him, so long as they did not sit down to *talk* for a day and a night. That was the trouble with the clans; they had an absurd notion that every man's voice should be heard in council, so they argued about *everything*, endlessly. Even their women were allowed to speak. Small wonder that it had been hundreds of years since they last threatened the Vale with anything beyond an occasional raid. Tyrion meant to change that.

Brorm rode with him. Behind them—after a quick bit of grumbling—the five clansmen followed on their undersize garrons, scrawny things that looked like ponies and scrambled up rock walls like goats.

The Stone Crows rode together, and Chella and Ulf stayed close as well, as the Moon Brothers and Black Ears had strong bonds between them. Timett son of Timett rode alone. Every clan in the Mountains of the Moon feared the Burned Men, who mortified their flesh with fire to prove their courage and (the others said) roasted babies at their feasts. And even the other Burned Men feared Timett, who had put out his own left eye with a white-hot knife when he reached the age of manhood. Tyrion gathered that it was more customary for a boy to burn off a nipple, a finger, or (if he was truly brave, or truly mad) an ear. Timett's fellow Burned Men were so awed by his choice of an eye that they promptly named him a red hand, which seemed to be some sort of a war chief.

"I wonder what their king burned off," Tyrion said to Bronn when he heard the tale. Grinning, the sellsword had tugged at his crotch... but even Bronn kept a respectful tongue around Timett. If a man was mad enough to put out his own eye, he was unlikely to be gentle to his enemies.

Distant watchers peered down from towers of unmortared stone as the party descended through the foothills, and once Tyrion saw a raven take wing. Where the high road twisted between two rocky outcrops, they came to the first strong point. A low earthen wall four feet high closed off the road, and a dozen crossbowmen manned the heights. Tyrion halted his followers out of range and rode to the wall alone. "Who commands here?" he shouted up.

The captain was quick to appear, and even quicker to give them an escort when he recognized his lord's son. They trotted past blackened fields and burned holdfasts, down to the riverlands and the Green Fork of the Trident. Tyrion saw no bodies, but the air was full of ravens and carrion crows; there had been fighting here, and recently.

Half a league from the crossroads, a barricade of sharpened stakes had been erected, manned by pikemen and archers. Behind the line, the camp spread out to the far distance. Thin fingers of smoke rose from hundreds of cookfires, mailed men sat under trees and honed their blades, and familiar banners fluttered from staffs thrust into the muddy ground.

A party of mounted horsemen rode forward to challenge them as they approached the stakes. The knight who led them wore silver armor inlaid with amethysts and a striped purple-and-silver cloak. His shield bore a unicorn sigil, and a spiral horn two feet long jutted up from the brow of his horsehead helm. Tyrion reined up to greet him. "Ser Flement."

Ser Flement Brax lifted his visor. "Tyrion," he said in astonishment. "My lord, we all feared you dead, or..." He looked at the clansmen uncertainly. "These... companions of yours..."

"Bosom friends and loyal retainers," Tyrion said. "Where will I find my lord father?"

"He has taken the inn at the crossroads for his quarters."

Tyrion laughed. The inn at the crossroads! Perhaps the gods were just after all. "I will see him at once."

"As you say, my lord." Ser Flement wheeled his horse about and shouted commands. Three rows of stakes were pulled from the ground to make a hole in the line. Tyrion led his party through.

Lord Tywin's camp spread over leagues. Chella's estimate of twenty thousand men could not be far wrong. The common men camped out in the open, but the knights had thrown up tents, and some of the high lords had erected pavilions as large as houses. Tyrion spied the red ox of the Presters, Lord Crakehall's brindled boar, the burning tree of Marbrand, the badger of

Lydden. Knights called out to him as he cantered past, and men-at-arms gaped at the clansmen in open astonishment.

Shagga was gaping back; beyond a certainty, he had never seen so many men, horses, and weapons in all his days. The rest of the mountain brigands did a better job of guarding their faces, but Tyrion had no doubts that they were full as much in awe. Better and better. The more impressed they were with the power of the Lannisters, the easier they would be to command.

The inn and its stables were much as he remembered, though little more than tumbled stones and blackened foundations remained where the rest of the village had stood. A gibbet had been erected in the yard, and the body that swung there was covered with ravens. At Tyrion's approach they took to the air, squawking and flapping their black wings. He dismounted and glanced up at what remained of the corpse. The birds had eaten her lips and eyes and most of her cheeks, baring her stained red teeth in a hideous smile. "A room, a meal, and a flagon of wine, that was all I asked," he reminded her with a sigh of reproach.

Boys emerged hesitantly from the stables to see to their horses. Shagga did not want to give his up. "The lad won't steal your mare," Tyrion assured him. "He only wants to give her some oats and water and brush out her coat." Shagga's coat could have used a good brushing too, but it would have been less than tactful to mention it. "You have my word, the horse will not be harmed."

Glaring, Shagga let go his grip on the reins. "This is the horse of Shagga son of Dolf," he roared at the stableboy.

"If he doesn't give her back, chop off his manhood and feed it to the goats," Tyrion promised. "Provided you can find some."

A pair of house guards in crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms stood under the inn's sign, on either side of the door. Tyrion recognized their captain. "My father?"

"In the common room, m'lord."

“My men will want meat and mead,” Tyrion told him. “See that they get it.” He entered the inn, and there was Father.

Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, was in his middle fifties, yet hard as a man of twenty. Even seated, he was tall, with long legs, broad shoulders, a flat stomach. His thin arms were corded with muscle. When his once-thick golden hair had begun to recede, he had commanded his barber to shave his head; Lord Tywin did not believe in half measures. He razored his lip and chin as well, but kept his side-whiskers, two great thickets of wiry golden hair that covered most of his cheeks from ear to jaw. His eyes were a pale green, flecked with gold. A fool more foolish than most had once jested that even Lord Tywin’s shit was flecked with gold. Some said the man was still alive, deep in the bowels of Casterly Rock.

Ser Kevan Lannister, his father’s only surviving brother, was sharing a flagon of ale with Lord Tywin when Tyrion entered the common room. His uncle was portly and balding, with a close-cropped yellow beard that followed the line of his massive jaw. Ser Kevan saw him first. “Tyrion,” he said in surprise.

“Uncle,” Tyrion said, bowing. “And my lord father. What a pleasure to find you here.”

Lord Tywin did not stir from his chair, but he did give his dwarf son a long, searching look. “I see that the rumors of your demise were unfounded.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Father,” Tyrion said. “No need to leap up and embrace me, I wouldn’t want you to strain yourself.” He crossed the room to their table, acutely conscious of the way his stunted legs made him waddle with every step. Whenever his father’s eyes were on him, he became uncomfortably aware of all his deformities and shortcomings. “Kind of you to go to war for me,” he said as he climbed into a chair and helped himself to a cup of his father’s ale.

“By my lights, it was you who started this,” Lord Tywin replied. “Your brother Jaime would never have meekly submitted to capture at the hands of a woman.”

“That’s one way we differ, Jaime and I. He’s taller as well, you may have noticed.”

His father ignored the sally. “The honor of our House was at stake. I had no choice but to ride. No man sheds Lannister blood with impunity.”

“*Hear Me Roar*,” Tyrion said, grinning. The Lannister words. “Truth be told, none of my blood was actually shed, although it was a close thing once or twice. Morrec and Jyck were killed.”

“I suppose you will be wanting some new men.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, Father, I’ve acquired a few of my own.” He tried a swallow of the ale. It was brown and yeasty, so thick you could almost chew it. Very fine, in truth. A pity his father had hanged the innkeep. “How is your war going?”

His uncle answered. “Well enough, for the nonce. Ser Edmure had scattered small troops of men along his borders to stop our raiding, and your lord father and I were able to destroy most of them piecemeal before they could regroup.”

“Your brother has been covering himself with glory,” his father said. “He smashed the Lords Vance and Piper at the Golden Tooth, and met the massed power of the Tullys under the walls of Riverrun. The lords of the Trident have been put to rout. Ser Edmure Tully was taken captive, with many of his knights and bannermen. Lord Blackwood led a few survivors back to Riverrun, where Jaime has them under siege. The rest fled to their own strongholds.”

“Your father and I have been marching on each in turn,” Ser Kevan said. “With Lord Blackwood gone, Raventree fell at once, and Lady Whent yielded Harrenhal for want of men to defend it. Ser Gregor burnt out the Pipers and the Brackens...”

“Leaving you unopposed?” Tyrion said.

“Not wholly,” Ser Kevan said. “The Mallisters still hold Seagard and Walder Frey is marshaling his levies at the Twins.”

“No matter,” Lord Tywin said. “Frey only takes the field when the scent of victory is in the air, and all he smells now is ruin. And Jason

Mallister lacks the strength to fight alone. Once Jaime takes Riverrun, they will both be quick enough to bend the knee. Unless the Starks and the Arryns come forth to oppose us, this war is good as won.”

“I would not fret overmuch about the Arryns if I were you,” Tyrion said. “The Starks are another matter. Lord Eddard—”

“—is our hostage,” his father said. “He will lead no armies while he rots in a dungeon under the Red Keep.”

“No,” Ser Kevan agreed, “but his son has called the banners and sits at Moat Cailin with a strong host around him.”

“No sword is strong until it’s been tempered,” Lord Tywin declared. “The Stark boy is a child. No doubt he likes the sound of warhorns well enough, and the sight of his banners fluttering in the wind, but in the end it comes down to butcher’s work. I doubt he has the stomach for it.”

Things *had* gotten interesting while he’d been away, Tyrion reflected. “And what is our fearless monarch doing whilst all this ‘butcher’s work’ is being done?” he wondered. “How has my lovely and persuasive sister gotten Robert to agree to the imprisonment of his dear friend Ned?”

“Robert Baratheon is dead,” his father told him. “Your nephew reigns in King’s Landing.”

That *did* take Tyrion aback. “My sister, you mean.” He took another gulp of ale. The realm would be a much different place with Cersei ruling in place of her husband.

“If you have a mind to make yourself of use, I will give you a command,” his father said. “Marq Piper and Karyl Vance are loose in our rear, raiding our lands across the Red Fork.”

Tyrion made a *tsking* sound. “The gall of them, fighting back. Ordinarily I’d be glad to punish such rudeness, Father, but the truth is, I have pressing business elsewhere.”

“Do you?” Lord Tywin did not seem awed. “We also have a pair of Ned Stark’s afterthoughts making a nuisance of themselves by harassing my foraging parties. Beric Dondarrion, some young lordling with delusions of valor. He has that fat jape of a priest with him, the one who likes to set his

sword on fire. Do you think you might be able to deal with them as you scamper off? Without making too much a botch of it?"

Tyrion wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and smiled. "Father, it warms my heart to think that you might entrust me with... what, twenty men? Fifty? Are you sure you can spare so many? Well, no matter. If I should come across Thoros and Lord Beric, I shall spank them both." He climbed down from his chair and waddled to the sideboard, where a wheel of veined white cheese sat surrounded by fruit. "First, though, I have some promises of my own to keep," he said as he sliced off a wedge. "I shall require three thousand helms and as many hauberks, plus swords, pikes, steel spearheads, maces, battleaxes, gauntlets, gorgets, greaves, breastplates, wagons to carry all this—"

The door behind him opened with a crash, so violently that Tyrion almost dropped his cheese. Ser Kevan leapt up swearing as the captain of the guard went flying across the room to smash against the hearth. As he tumbled down into the cold ashes, his lion helm askew, Shagga snapped the man's sword in two over a knee thick as a tree trunk, threw down the pieces, and lumbered into the common room. He was preceded by his stench, riper than the cheese and overpowering in the closed space. "Little redcape," he snarled, "when next you bare steel on Shagga son of Dolf, I will chop off your manhood and roast it in the fire."

"What, no goats?" Tyrion said, taking a bite of cheese.

The other clansmen followed Shagga into the common room, Bronn with them. The sellsword gave Tyrion a rueful shrug.

"Who might you be?" Lord Tywin asked, cool as snow.

"They followed me home, Father," Tyrion explained. "May I keep them? They don't eat much."

No one was smiling. "By what right do you savages intrude on our councils?" demanded Ser Kevan.

"Savages, lowlander?" Conn might have been handsome if you washed him. "We are free men, and free men by rights sit on all war councils."

"Which one is the lion lord?" Chella asked.



“They are both old men,” announced Timett son of Timett, who had yet to see his twentieth year.

Ser Kevan’s hand went to his sword hilt, but his brother placed two fingers on his wrist and held him fast. Lord Tywin seemed unperturbed. “Tyrion, have you forgotten your courtesies? Kindly acquaint us with our... honored guests.”

Tyrion licked his fingers. “With pleasure,” he said. “The fair maid is Chella daughter of Cheyk of the Black Ears.”

“I’m no maid,” Chella protested. “My sons have taken fifty ears among them.”

“May they take fifty more.” Tyrion waddled away from her. “This is Conn son of Coratt. Shagga son of Dolf is the one who looks like Casterly Rock with hair. They are Stone Crows. Here is Ulf son of Umar of the Moon Brothers, and here Timett son of Timett, a red hand of the Burned Men. And this is Bronn, a sellsword of no particular allegiance. He has already changed sides twice in the short time I’ve known him, you and he ought to get on famously, Father.” To Bronn and the clansmen he said, “May I present my lord father, Tywin son of Tytos of House Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, Shield of Lannisport, and once and future Hand of the King.”

Lord Tywin rose, dignified and correct. “Even in the west, we know the prowess of the warrior clans of the Mountains of the Moon. What brings you down from your strongholds, my lords?”

“Horses,” said Shagga.

“A promise of silk and steel,” said Timett son of Timett.

Tyrion was about to tell his lord father how he proposed to reduce the Vale of Arryn to a smoking wasteland, but he was never given the chance. The door banged open again. The messenger gave Tyrion’s clansmen a quick, queer look as he dropped to one knee before Lord Tywin. “My lord,” he said, “Ser Addam bid me tell you that the Stark host is moving down the causeway.”

Lord Tywin Lannister did not smile. Lord Tywin never smiled, but Tyrion had learned to read his father's pleasure all the same, and it was there on his face. "So the wolfling is leaving his den to play among the lions," he said in a voice of quiet satisfaction. "Splendid. Return to Ser Addam and tell him to fall back. He is not to engage the northerners until we arrive, but I want him to harass their flanks and draw them farther south."

"It will be as you command." The rider took his leave.

"We are well situated here," Ser Kevan pointed out. "Close to the ford and ringed by pits and spikes. If they are coming south, I say let them come, and break themselves against us."

"The boy may hang back or lose his courage when he sees our numbers," Lord Tywin replied. "The sooner the Starks are broken, the sooner I shall be free to deal with Stannis Baratheon. Tell the drummers to beat assembly, and send word to Jaime that I am marching against Robb Stark."

"As you will," Ser Kevan said.

Tyrion watched with a grim fascination as his lord father turned next to the half-wild clansmen. "It is said that the men of the mountain clans are warriors without fear."

"It is said truly," Conn of the Stone Crows answered.

"And the women," Chella added.

"Ride with me against my enemies, and you shall have all my son promised you, and more," Lord Tywin told them.

"Would you pay us with our own coin?" Ulf son of Umar said. "Why should we need the father's promise, when we have the son's?"

"I said nothing of *need*," Lord Tywin replied. "My words were courtesy, nothing more. You need not join us. The men of the winterlands are made of iron and ice, and even my boldest knights fear to face them."

*Oh, deftly done*, Tyrion thought, smiling crookedly.

"The Burned Men fear nothing. Timett son of Timett will ride with the lions."

“Wherever the Burned Men go, the Stone Crows have been there first,” Conn declared hotly. “We ride as well.”

“Shagga son of Dolf will chop off their manhoods and feed them to the crows.”

“We will ride with you, lion lord,” Chella daughter of Cheyk agreed, “but only if your halfman son goes with us. He has bought his breath with promises. Until we hold the steel he has pledged us, his life is ours.”

Lord Tywin turned his gold-flecked eyes on his son.

“Joy,” Tyrion said with a resigned smile.