

TYRION

The queen was not disposed to wait on Varys. “Treason is vile enough,” she declared furiously, “but this is barefaced naked villainy, and I do not need that mincing eunuch to tell me what must be done with villains.”

Tyrion took the letters from his sister’s hand and compared them side by side. There were two copies, the words exactly alike, though they had been written by different hands.

“Maester Frenken received the first missive at Castle Stokeworth,” Grand Maester Pycelle explained. “The second copy came through Lord Gyles.”

Littlefinger fingered his beard. “If Stannis bothered with *them*, it’s past certain every other lord in the Seven Kingdoms saw a copy as well.”

“I want these letters burned, every one,” Cersei declared. “No hint of this must reach my son’s ears, or my father’s.”

“I imagine Father’s heard rather more than a hint by now,” Tyrion said dryly. “Doubtless Stannis sent a bird to Casterly Rock, and another to Harrenhal. As for burning the letters, to what point? The song is sung, the wine is spilled, the wench is pregnant. And this is not as dire as it seems, in truth.”

Cersei turned on him in green-eyed fury. “Are you utterly witless? Did you read what he says? *The boy Joffrey*, he calls him. And he dares to accuse *me* of incest, adultery, and treason!”

Only because you’re guilty. It was astonishing to see how angry Cersei could wax over accusations she knew perfectly well to be true. *If we lose the war, she ought to take up mummery, she has a gift for it.* Tyrion waited until she was done and said, “Stannis must have some pretext to justify his rebellion. What did you expect him to write? ‘Joffrey is my brother’s trueborn son and heir, but I mean to take his throne for all that’?”

“I will not suffer to be called a whore!”

Why, sister, he never claims Jaime paid you. Tyrion made a show of glancing over the writing again. There had been some niggling phrase...“Done in the Light of the Lord,” he read. “A queer choice of words, that.”

Pycelle cleared his throat. “These words often appear in letters and documents from the Free Cities. They mean no more than, let us say, *written in the sight of god*. The god of the red priests. It is their usage, I do believe.”

“Varys told us some years past that Lady Selyse had taken up with a red priest,” Littlefinger reminded them.

Tyrion tapped the paper. “And now it would seem her lord husband has done the same. We can use that against him. Urge the High Septon to reveal how Stannis has turned against the gods as well as his rightful king...”

“Yes, yes,” the queen said impatiently, “but first we must stop this filth from spreading further. The council must issue an edict. Any man heard speaking of incest or calling Joff a bastard should lose his tongue for it.”

“A prudent measure,” said Grand Maester Pycelle, his chain of office clinking as he nodded.

“A folly,” sighed Tyrion. “When you tear out a man’s tongue, you are not proving him a liar, you’re only telling the world that you fear what he might say.”

“So what would *you* have us do?” his sister demanded.

“Very little. Let them whisper, they’ll grow bored with the tale soon enough. Any man with a thimble of sense will see it for a clumsy attempt to justify usurping the crown. Does Stannis offer proof? How could he, when it never happened?” Tyrion gave his sister his sweetest smile.

“That’s so,” she had to say. “Still...”

“Your Grace, your brother has the right of this.” Petyr Baelish steeped his fingers. “If we attempt to silence this talk, we only lend it credence. Better to treat it with contempt, like the pathetic lie it is. And meantime, fight fire with fire.”

Cersei gave him a measuring look. “What sort of fire?”

“A tale of somewhat the same nature, perhaps. But more easily believed. Lord Stannis has spent most of his marriage apart from his wife. Not that I fault him, I’d do the same were I married to Lady Selyse. Nonetheless, if we put it about that her daughter is baseborn and Stannis a cuckold, well... the smallfolk are always eager to believe the worst of their lords, particularly those as stern, sour, and prickly proud as Stannis Baratheon.”

“He has never been much loved, that’s true.” Cersei considered a moment. “So we pay him back in his own coin. Yes, I like this. Who can we name as Lady Selyse’s lover? She has two brothers, I believe. And one of her uncles has been with her on Dragonstone all this time...”

“Ser Axell Florent is her castellan.” Loath as Tyrion was to admit it, Littlefinger’s scheme had promise. Stannis had never been enamored of his wife, but he was bristly as a hedgehog where his honor was concerned and mistrustful by nature. If they could sow discord between him and his followers, it could only help their cause. “The child has the Florent ears, I’m told.”

Littlefinger gestured languidly. “A trade envoy from Lys once observed to me that Lord Stannis must love his daughter very well, since he’d erected hundreds of statues of her all along the walls of Dragonstone. ‘My lord’ I had to tell him, ‘those are gargoyles.’” He chuckled. “Ser Axell might serve for Shireen’s father, but in my experience, the more bizarre and shocking a tale the more apt it is to be repeated. Stannis keeps an especially grotesque fool, a lackwit with a tattooed face.”

Grand Maester Pycelle gaped at him, aghast. “Surely you do not mean to suggest that Lady Selyse would bring a *fool* into her bed?”

“You’d have to be a fool to want to bed Selyse Florent,” said Littlefinger. “Doubtless Patchface reminded her of Stannis. And the best lies contain within them nuggets of truth, enough to give a listener pause. As it happens, this fool is utterly devoted to the girl and follows her everywhere. They even look somewhat alike. Shireen has a mottled, half-frozen face as well.”

Pycelle was lost. “But that is from the greyscale that near killed her as a babe, poor thing.”

“I like my tale better,” said Littlefinger, “and so will the smallfolk. Most of them believe that if a woman eats rabbit while pregnant, her child will be born with long floppy ears.”

Cersei smiled the sort of smile she customarily reserved for Jaime. “Lord Petyr, you are a wicked creature.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“And a most accomplished liar,” Tyrion added, less warmly. *This one is more dangerous than I knew*, he reflected.

Littlefinger’s grey-green eyes met the dwarf’s mismatched stare with no hint of unease. “We all have our gifts, my lord.”

The queen was too caught up in her revenge to take note of the exchange. “Cuckolded by a halfwit fool! Stannis will be laughed at in every winesink this side of the narrow sea.”

“The story should not come from us,” Tyrion said, “or it will be seen for a self-serving lie.” *Which it is, to be sure.*

Once more Littlefinger supplied the answer. “Whores love to gossip, and as it happens I own a brothel or three. And no doubt Varys can plant seeds in the alehouses and pot-shops.”

“Varys,” Cersei said, frowning. “Where *is* Varys?”

“I have been wondering about that myself, Your Grace.”

“The Spider spins his secret webs day and night,” Grand Maester Pycelle said ominously. “I mistrust that one, my lords.”

“And he speaks so kindly of you.” Tyrion pushed himself off his chair. As it happened, he knew what the eunuch was about, but it was nothing the other councillors needed to hear. “Pray excuse me, my lords. Other business calls.”

Cersei was instantly suspicious. “King’s business?”

“Nothing you need trouble yourself about.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Would you spoil my surprise?” Tyrion said. “I’m having a gift made for Joffrey. A little chain.”

“What does he need with another chain? He has gold chains and silver, more than he can wear. If you think for a moment you can buy Joff’s love with gifts—”

“Why, surely I *have* the king’s love, as he has mine. And *this* chain I believe he may one day treasure above all others.” The little man bowed and waddled to the door.

Bronn was waiting outside the council chambers to escort him back to the Tower of the Hand. “The smiths are in your audience chamber, waiting your pleasure,” he said as they crossed the ward.

“Waiting my pleasure. I like the ring of that, Bronn. You almost sound a proper courtier. Next you’ll be kneeling.”

“Fuck you, dwarf.”

“That’s Shae’s task.” Tyrion heard Lady Tanda calling to him merrily from the top of the serpentine steps. Pretending not to notice her, he waddled a bit faster. “See that my litter is readied, I’ll be leaving the castle as soon as I’m done here.” Two of the Moon Brothers had the door guard. Tyrion greeted them pleasantly, and grimaced before starting up the stairs. The climb to his bedchamber made his legs ache.

Within he found a boy of twelve laying out clothing on the bed; his squire, such that he was. Podrick Payne was so shy he was furtive. Tyrion had never quite gotten over the suspicion that his father had inflicted the boy on him as a joke.

“Your garb, my lord,” the boy mumbled when Tyrion entered, staring down at his boots. Even when he worked up the courage to speak, Pod could never quite manage to look at you. “For the audience. And your chain. The Hand’s chain.”

“Very good. Help me dress.” The doublet was black velvet covered with golden studs in the shape of lions’ heads, the chain a loop of solid gold hands, the fingers of each clasping the wrist of the next. Pod brought him a

cloak of crimson silk fringed in gold, cut to his height. On a normal man, it would be no more than a half cape.

The Hand's private audience chamber was not so large as the king's, nor a patch on the vastness of the throne room, but Tyrion liked its Myrish rugs, wall hangings, and sense of intimacy. As he entered, his steward cried out, "Tyrion Lannister, Hand of the King." He liked that too. The gaggle of smiths, armorers, and ironmongers that Bronn had collected fell to their knees.

He hoisted himself up into the high seat under the round golden window and bid them rise. "Goodmen, I know you are all busy, so I will be succinct. Pod, if you please." The boy handed him a canvas sack. Tyrion yanked the drawstring and upended the bag. Its contents spilled onto the rug with a muffled *thunk* of metal on wool. "I had these made at the castle forge. I want a thousand more just like them."

One of the smiths knelt to inspect the object: three immense steel links, twisted together. "A mighty chain."

"Mighty, but short," the dwarf replied. "Somewhat like me. I fancy one a good deal longer. Do you have a name?"

"They call me Ironbelly, m'lord." The smith was squat and broad, plainly dressed in wool and leather, but his arms were as thick as a bull's neck.

"I want every forge in King's Landing turned to making these links and joining them. All other work is to be put aside. I want every man who knows the art of working metal set to this task, be he master, journeyman, or apprentice. When I ride up the Street of Steel, I want to hear hammers ringing, night or day. And I want a man, a strong man, to see that all this is done. Are you that man, Goodman Ironbelly?"

"Might be I am, m'lord. But what of the mail and swords the queen was wanting?"

Another smith spoke up. "Her Grace commanded us to make chainmail and armor, swords and daggers and axes, all in great numbers. For arming her new gold cloaks, m'lord."

“That work can wait,” Tyrion said. “The chain first.”

“M’lord, begging your pardon, Her Grace said those as didn’t meet their numbers would have their hands crushed,” the anxious Smith persisted. “Smashed on their own anvils, she said.”

Sweet Cersei, always striving to make the smallfolk love us. “No one will have their hands smashed. You have my word on it.”

“Iron is grown dear,” Ironbelly declared, “and this chain will be needing much of it, and coke beside, for the fires.”

“Lord Baelish will see that you have coin as you need it,” Tyrion promised. He could count on Littlefinger for that much, he hoped. “I will command the City Watch to help you find iron. Melt down every horseshoe in this city if you must.”

An older man moved forward, richly dressed in a damask tunic with silver fastenings and a cloak lined with foxfur. He knelt to examine the great steel links Tyrion had dumped on the floor. “My lord,” he announced gravely, “this is crude work at best. There is no art to it. Suitable labor for common smiths, no doubt, for men who bend horseshoes and hammer out kettles, but I am a master armorer, as it please my lord. This is no work for me, nor my fellow masters. We make swords as sharp as song, armor such as a god might wear. Not *this*.”

Tyrion tilted his head to the side and gave the man a dose of his mismatched eyes. “What is your name, master armorer?”

“Salloreon, as it please my lord. If the King’s Hand will permit, I should be *most* honored to forge him a suit of armor suitable to his House and high office.” Two of the others sniggered, but Salloreon plunged ahead, heedless. “Plate and scale, I think. The scales gilded bright as the sun, the plate enameled a deep Lannister crimson. I would suggest a demon’s head for a helm, crowned with tall golden horns. When you ride into battle, men will shrink away in fear.”

A demon’s head, Tyrion thought ruefully, *now what does that say of me?* “Master Salloreon, I plan to fight the rest of my battles from this chair. It’s links I need, not demon horns. So let me put it to you this way. You will

make chains, or you will wear them. The choice is yours.” He rose, and took his leave with nary a backward glance.

Bronn was waiting by the gate with his litter and an escort of mounted Black Ears. “You know where we’re bound,” Tyrion told him. He accepted a hand up into the litter. He had done all he could to feed the hungry city—he’d set several hundred carpenters to building fishing boats in place of catapults, opened the kingswood to any hunter who dared to cross the river, even sent gold cloaks foraging to the west and south—yet he still saw accusing eyes everywhere he rode. The litter’s curtains shielded him from that, and besides gave him leisure to think.

As they wound their slow way down twisty Shadowblack Lane to the foot of Aegon’s High Hill, Tyrion reflected on the events of the morning. His sister’s ire had led her to overlook the true significance of Stannis Baratheon’s letter. Without proof, his accusations were nothing; what mattered was that he had named himself a king. *And what will Renly make of that?* They could not *both* sit the Iron Throne.

Idly, he pushed the curtain back a few inches to peer out at the streets. Black Ears rode on both sides of him, their grisly necklaces looped about their throats, while Bronn went in front to clear the way. He watched the passersby watching him, and played a little game with himself, trying to sort the informers from the rest. *The ones who look the most suspicious are likely innocent*, he decided. *It’s the ones who look innocent I need to beware.*

His destination was behind the hill of Rhaenys, and the streets were crowded. Almost an hour had passed before the litter swayed to a stop. Tyrion was dozing, but he woke abruptly when the motion ceased, rubbed the sand from his eyes, and accepted Bronn’s hand to climb down.

The house was two stories tall, stone below and timber above. A round turret rose from one corner of the structure. Many of the windows were leaded. Over the door swung an ornate lamp, a globe of gilded metal and scarlet glass.

“A brothel,” Bronn said. “What do you mean to do here?”

“What does one usually do in a brothel?”

The sellsword laughed. “Shae’s not enough?”

“She was pretty enough for a camp follower, but I’m no longer in camp. Little men have big appetites, and I’m told the girls here are fit for a king.”

“Is the boy old enough?”

“Not Joffrey. Robert. This house was a great favorite of his.” *Although Joffrey may indeed be old enough. An interesting notion, that.* “If you and the Black Ears care to amuse yourselves, feel free, but Chataya’s girls are costly. You’ll find cheaper houses all along the street. Leave one man here who’ll know where to find the others when I wish to return.”

Bronn nodded. “As you say.” The Black Ears were all grins.

Inside the door, a tall woman in flowing silks was waiting for him. She had ebon skin and sandalwood eyes. “I am Chataya,” she announced, bowing deeply. “And you are—”

“Let us not get into the habit of names. Names are dangerous.” The air smelled of some exotic spice, and the floor beneath his feet displayed a mosaic of two women entwined in love. “You have a pleasant establishment.”

“I have labored long to make it so. I am glad the Hand is pleased.” Her voice was flowing amber, liquid with the accents of the distant Summer Isles.

“Titles can be as dangerous as names,” Tyrion warned. “Show me a few of your girls.”

“It will be my great delight. You will find that they are all as sweet as they are beautiful, and skilled in every art of love.” She swept off gracefully, leaving Tyrion to waddle after as best he could on legs half the length of hers.

From behind an ornate Myrish screen carved with flowers and fancies and dreaming maidens, they peered unseen into a common room where an old man was playing a cheerful air on the pipes. In a cushioned alcove, a drunken Tyroshi with a purple beard dandled a buxom young wench on his knee. He’d unlaced her bodice and was tilting his cup to pour a thin trickle

of wine over her breasts so he might lap it off. Two other girls sat playing at tiles before a leaded glass window. The freckled one wore a chain of blue flowers in her honeyed hair. The other had skin as smooth and black as polished jet, wide dark eyes, small pointed breasts. They dressed in flowing silks cinched at the waist with beaded belts. The sunlight pouring through the colored glass outlined their sweet young bodies through the thin cloth, and Tyrion felt a stirring in his groin. "I would respectfully suggest the dark-skinned girl," said Chataya.

"She's young."

"She has sixteen years, my lord."

A good age for Joffrey, he thought, remembering what Bronn had said. His first had been even younger. Tyrion remembered how shy she'd seemed as he drew her dress up over her head the first time. Long dark hair and blue eyes you could drown in, and he had. So long ago... *What a wretched fool you are, dwarf*. "Does she come from your home lands, this girl?"

"Her blood is the blood of summer, my lord, but my daughter was born here in King's Landing." His surprise must have shown on his face, for Chataya continued, "My people hold that there is no shame to be found in the pillow house. In the Summer Isles, those who are skilled at giving pleasure are greatly esteemed. Many highborn youths and maidens serve for a few years after their flowerings, to honor the gods."

"What do the gods have to do with it?"

"The gods made our bodies as well as our souls, is it not so? They give us voices, so we might worship them with song. They give us hands, so we might build them temples. And they give us desire, so we might mate and worship them in that way."

"Remind me to tell the High Septon," said Tyrion. "If I could pray with my cock, I'd be much more religious." He waved a hand. "I will gladly accept your suggestion."

"I shall summon my daughter. Come."

The girl met him at the foot of the stairs. Taller than Shae, though not so tall as her mother, she had to kneel before Tyrion could kiss her. "My

name is Alayaya,” she said, with only the slightest hint of her mother’s accent. “Come, my lord.” She took him by the hand and drew him up two flights of stairs, then down a long hall. Gasps and shrieks of pleasure were coming from behind one of the closed doors, giggles and whispers from another. Tyrion’s cock pressed against the lacings of his breeches. *This could be humiliating*, he thought as he followed Alayaya up another stair to the turret room. There was only one door. She led him through and closed it. Within the room was a great canopied bed, a tall wardrobe decorated with erotic carvings, and a narrow window of leaded glass in a pattern of red and yellow diamonds.

“You are very beautiful, Alayaya,” Tyrion told her when they were alone. “From head to heels, every part of you is lovely. Yet just now the part that interests me most is your tongue.”

“My lord will find my tongue well schooled. When I was a girl I learned when to use it, and when not.”

“That pleases me.” Tyrion smiled. “So what shall we do now? Perchance you have some suggestion?”

“Yes,” she said. “If my lord will open the wardrobe, he will find what he seeks.”

Tyrion kissed her hand, and climbed inside the empty wardrobe. Alayaya closed it after him. He groped for the back panel, felt it slide under his fingers, and pushed it all the way aside. The hollow space behind the walls was pitch-black, but he fumbled until he felt metal. His hand closed around the rung of a ladder. He found a lower rung with his foot, and started down. Well below street level, the shaft opened onto a slanting earthen tunnel, where he found Varys waiting with candle in hand.

Varys did not look at all like himself. A scarred face and a stubble of dark beard showed under his spiked steel cap, and he wore mail over boiled leather, dirk and shortsword at his belt. “Was Chataya’s to your satisfaction, my lord?”

“Almost too much so,” admitted Tyrion. “You’re certain this woman can be relied on?”

“I am certain of nothing in this fickle and treacherous world, my lord. Chataya has no cause to love the queen, though, and she knows that she has you to thank for ridding her of Allar Deem. Shall we go?” He started down the tunnel.

Even his walk is different, Tyrion observed. The scent of sour wine and garlic clung to Varys instead of lavender. “I like this new garb of yours,” he offered as they went.

“The work I do does not permit me to travel the streets amid a column of knights. So when I leave the castle, I adopt more suitable guises, and thus live to serve you longer.”

“Leather becomes you. You ought to come like this to our next council session.”

“Your sister would not approve, my lord.”

“My sister would soil her smallclothes.” He smiled in the dark. “I saw no signs of any of her spies skulking after me.”

“I am pleased to hear it, my lord. Some of your sister’s hirelings are mine as well, unbeknownst to her. I should hate to think they had grown so sloppy as to be seen.”

“Well, *I’d* hate to think I was climbing through wardrobes and suffering the pangs of frustrated lust all for naught.”

“Scarcely for naught,” Varys assured him. “They know you are here. Whether any will be bold enough to enter Chataya’s in the guise of patrons I cannot say, but I find it best to err on the side of caution.”

“How is it a brothel happens to have a secret entrance?”

“The tunnel was dug for another King’s Hand, whose honor would not allow him to enter such a house openly. Chataya has closely guarded the knowledge of its existence.”

“And yet you knew of it.”

“Little birds fly through many a dark tunnel. Careful, the steps are steep.”

They emerged through a trap at the back of a stable, having come perhaps a distance of three blocks under Rhaenys's Hill. A horse whickered in his stall when Tyrion let the door slam shut. Varys blew out the candle and set it on a beam and Tyrion gazed about. A mule and three horses occupied the stalls. He waddled over to the piebald gelding and took a look at his teeth. "Old," he said, "and I have my doubts about his wind."

"He is not a mount to carry you into battle, true," Varys replied, "but he will serve, and attract no notice. As will the others. And the stableboys see and hear only the animals." The eunuch took a cloak from a peg. It was roughspun, sun-faded, and threadbare, but very ample in its cut. "If you will permit me." When he swept it over Tyrion's shoulders it enveloped him head to heel, with a cowl that could be pulled forward to drown his face in shadows. "Men see what they expect to see," Varys said as he fussed and pulled. "Dwarfs are not so common a sight as children, so a child is what they will see. A boy in an old cloak on his father's horse, going about his father's business. Though it would be best if you came most often by night."

"I plan to... after today. At the moment, though, Shae awaits me." He had put her up in a walled manse at the far northeast corner of King's Landing, not far from the sea, but he had not dared visit her there for fear of being followed.

"Which horse will you have?"

Tyrion shrugged. "This one will do well enough."

"I shall saddle him for you." Varys took tack and saddle down from a peg.

Tyrion adjusted the heavy cloak and paced restlessly. "You missed a lively council. Stannis has crowned himself, it seems."

"I know."

"He accuses my brother and sister of incest. I wonder how he came by that suspicion."

"Perhaps he read a book and looked at the color of a bastard's hair, as Ned Stark did, and Jon Arryn before him. Or perhaps someone whispered it

in his ear.” The eunuch’s laugh was not his usual giggle, but deeper and more throaty.

“Someone like you, perchance?”

“Am I suspected? It was not me.”

“If it had been, would you admit it?”

“No. But why should I betray a secret I have kept so long? It is one thing to deceive a king, and quite another to hide from the cricket in the rushes and the little bird in the chimney. Besides, the bastards were there for all to see.”

“Robert’s bastards? What of them?”

“He fathered eight, to the best of my knowing,” Varys said as he wrestled with the saddle. “Their mothers were copper and honey, chestnut and butter, yet the babes were all black as ravens... and as ill-omened, it would seem. So when Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen slid out between your sister’s thighs, each as golden as the sun, the truth was not hard to glimpse.”

Tyrian shook his head. *If she had borne only one child for her husband, it would have been enough to disarm suspicion... but then she would not have been Cersei.* “If you were not this whisperer, who was?”

“Some traitor, doubtless.” Varys tightened the cinch.

“Littlefinger?”

“I named no name.”

Tyrian let the eunuch help him mount. “Lord Varys,” he said from the saddle, “sometimes I feel as though you are the best friend I have in King’s Landing, and sometimes I feel you are my worst enemy.”

“How odd. I think quite the same of you.”