

“A voice from nowhere,” Sandor said. He peered through his helm, looking this way and that. “Spirits of the air!”

The prince laughed, as he always laughed when his bodyguard did this mummer’s farce. Tyrion was used to it. “Down here.”

The tall man peered down at the ground, and pretended to notice him. “The little lord Tyrion,” he said. “My pardons. I did not see you standing there.”

“I am in no mood for your insolence today.” Tyrion turned to his nephew. “Joffrey, it is past time you called on Lord Eddard and his lady, to offer them your comfort.”

Joffrey looked as petulant as only a boy prince can look. “What good will my comfort do them?”

“None,” Tyrion said. “Yet it is expected of you. Your absence has been noted.”

“The Stark boy is nothing to me,” Joffrey said. “I cannot abide the wailing of women.”

Tyrion Lannister reached up and slapped his nephew hard across the face. The boy’s cheek began to redden.

“One word,” Tyrion said, “and I will hit you again.”

“I’m going to tell Mother!” Joffrey exclaimed.

Tyrion hit him again. Now both cheeks flamed.

“You tell your mother,” Tyrion told him. “But first you get yourself to Lord and Lady Stark, and you fall to your knees in front of them, and you tell them how very sorry you are, and that you are at their service if there is the slightest thing you can do for them or theirs in this desperate hour, and that all your prayers go with them. Do you understand? Do you?”

The boy looked as though he was going to cry. Instead, he managed a weak nod. Then he turned and fled headlong from the yard, holding his cheek. Tyrion watched him run.

A shadow fell across his face. He turned to find Clegane looming overhead like a cliff. His soot-dark armor seemed to blot out the sun. He had lowered the visor on his helm. It was fashioned in the likeness of a snarling black hound, fearsome to behold, but Tyrion had always thought it a great improvement over Clegane’s hideously burned face.

“The prince will remember that, little lord,” the Hound warned him. The helm turned his laugh into a hollow rumble.

“I pray he does,” Tyrion Lannister replied. “If he forgets, be a good dog and remind him.” He glanced around the courtyard. “Do you know where I might find my brother?”

“Breaking fast with the queen.”

“Ah,” Tyrion said. He gave Sandor Clegane a perfunctory nod and walked away as briskly as his stunted legs would carry him, whistling. He pitied the first knight to try the Hound today. The man did have a temper.

A cold, cheerless meal had been laid out in the morning room of the Guest House. Jaime sat at table with Cersei and the children, talking in low, hushed voices.

“Is Robert still abed?” Tyrion asked as he seated himself, uninvited, at the table.