

“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, ripier 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.”