

TYRION

On a hill overlooking the kingsroad, a long trestle table of rough-hewn pine had been erected beneath an elm tree and covered with a golden cloth. There, beside his pavilion, Lord Tywin took his evening meal with his chief knights and lords bannermen, his great crimson-and-gold standard waving overhead from a lofty pike.

Tyrion arrived late, saddlesore, and sour, all too vividly aware of how amusing he must look as he waddled up the slope to his father. The day's march had been long and tiring. He thought he might get quite drunk tonight. It was twilight, and the air was alive with drifting fireflies.

The cooks were serving the meat course: five suckling pigs, skin seared and crackling, a different fruit in every mouth. The smell made his mouth water. "My pardons," he began, taking his place on the bench beside his uncle.

"Perhaps I'd best charge you with burying our dead, Tyrion," Lord Tywin said. "If you are as late to battle as you are to table, the fighting will all be done by the time you arrive."

"Oh, surely you can save me a peasant or two, Father," Tyrion replied. "Not too many, I wouldn't want to be greedy." He filled his wine cup and watched a serving man carve into the pig. The crisp skin crackled under his knife, and hot juice ran from the meat. It was the loveliest sight Tyrion had seen in ages.

"Ser Addam's outriders say the Stark host has moved south from the Twins," his father reported as his trencher was filled with slices of pork. "Lord Frey's levies have joined them. They are likely no more than a day's march north of us."

"Please, Father," Tyrion said. "I'm about to eat."

"Does the thought of facing the Stark boy unman you, Tyrion? Your brother Jaime would be eager to come to grips with him."

"I'd sooner come to grips with that pig. Robb Stark is not half so tender, and he never smelled as good."

Lord Lefford, the sour bird who had charge of their stores and supplies, leaned forward. "I hope your savages do not share your reluctance, else we've wasted our good steel on them."

"My savages will put your steel to excellent use, my lord," Tyrion replied. When he had told Lefford he needed arms and armor to equip the three hundred men Ulf had fetched down out of the foothills, you would have thought he'd asked the man to turn his virgin daughters over to their pleasure.

Lord Lefford frowned. "I saw that great hairy one today, the one who insisted that he must have two battle-axes, the heavy black steel ones with twin crescent blades."

"Shagga likes to kill with either hand," Tyrion said as a trencher of steaming pork was laid in front of him.

"He still had that wood-axe of his strapped to his back."

"Shagga is of the opinion that three axes are even better than two." Tyrion reached a thumb and forefinger into the salt dish, and sprinkled a healthy pinch over his meat.