



TYRION

The new crown that his father had given the Faith stood twice as tall as the one the mob had smashed, a glory of crystal and spun gold. Rainbow light flashed and shimmered every time the High Septon moved his head, but Tyrion had to wonder how the man could bear the weight. And even he had to concede that Joffrey and Margaery made a regal couple, as they stood side-by-side between the towering gilded statues of the Father and the Mother.

The bride was lovely in ivory silk and Myrish lace, her skirts decorated with floral patterns picked out in seed pearls. As Renly's widow, she might have worn the Baratheon colors, gold and black, yet she came to them a Tyrell, in a maiden's cloak made of a hundred cloth-of-gold roses sewn to green velvet. He wondered if she really was a maiden. *Not that Joffrey is like to know the difference.*

The king looked near as splendid as his bride, in his doublet of dusky rose, beneath a cloak of deep crimson velvet blazoned with his stag and lion. The crown rested easily on his curls, gold on gold. *I saved that bloody crown for him.* Tyrion shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He could not stand still. *Too much wine.* He should have thought to relieve himself before they set out from the Red Keep. The sleepless night he'd spent with Shae was making itself felt too, but most of all he wanted to strangle his bloody royal nephew.

I am no stranger to Valyrian steel, the boy had boasted. The septons were always going on about how the Father Above judges us all. *If the Father would be so good as to topple over and crush Joff like a dung beetle, I might even believe it.*

He ought to have seen it long ago. Jaime would never send another man to do his killing, and Cersei was too cunning to use a knife that could be traced back to her, but Joff, arrogant vicious stupid little wretch that he was . . .

He remembered a cold morning when he'd climbed down the steep exterior steps from Winterfell's library to find Prince Joffrey jesting with the Hound about killing wolves. *Send a dog to kill a wolf*, he said. Even Joffrey was not so foolish as to command Sandor Clegane to slay a son of Eddard Stark, however; the Hound would have gone to Cersei. Instead the boy found his catspaw among the unsavory lot of freeriders, merchants, and camp followers who'd attached themselves to the king's party as they made their way north. *Some poxy lackwit willing to risk his life for a prince's favor and a little coin.* Tyrion wondered whose idea it had been to wait until Robert left Winterfell before opening Bran's throat. *Joff's, most like. No doubt he thought it was the height of cunning.*

The prince's own dagger had a jeweled pommel and inlaid goldwork on the blade, Tyrion seemed to recall. At least Joff had not been stupid enough to use that. Instead he went poking among his father's weapons. Robert Baratheon was a man of careless generosity, and would have given his son any dagger he wanted . . . but Tyrion guessed that the boy had just taken it. Robert had come to Winterfell with a long tail of knights and retainers, a huge wheelhouse, and a baggage train. No doubt some diligent servant had made certain that the king's weapons went with him, in case he should desire any of them.

The blade Joff chose was nice and plain. No goldwork, no jewels in the hilt, no silver inlay on the blade. King Robert never wore it, had likely forgotten he owned it. Yet the Valyrian steel was deadly sharp . . . sharp enough to slice through skin, flesh, and muscle in one quick stroke. *I am no stranger to Valyrian steel.* But he had been, hadn't he? Else he would never have been so foolish as to pick Littlefinger's knife.

The *why* of it still eluded him. *Simple cruelty, perhaps?* His nephew had that in abundance. It was all Tyrion could do not to retch up all the wine he'd drunk, piss in his breeches, or both. He squirmed uncomfortably. He ought to have held his tongue at breakfast. *The boy knows I know now. My big mouth will be the death of me, I swear it.*

The seven vows were made, the seven blessings invoked, and the seven promises exchanged. When the wedding song had been sung and the challenge had gone unanswered, it was time for the exchange of cloaks. Tyrion shifted his weight from one stunted leg to the other, trying to see between his father and his uncle Kevan. *If the gods are just, Joff will make a hash of this.* He made certain not to look at Sansa, lest his bitterness show in his eyes. *You might have knelt, damn you. Would it have been so bloody hard to bend those stiff Stark knees of yours and let me keep a little dignity?*

Mace Tyrell removed his daughter's maiden cloak tenderly, while Joffrey accepted the folded bride's cloak from his brother Tommen and shook it out with a flourish. The boy king was as tall at thirteen as his bride was at sixteen; he would not require a fool's back to climb upon. He draped Margaery in the crimson-and-gold and leaned close to fasten it at her throat. And that easily she passed from her father's protection to her husband's. *But who will protect her from Joff?* Tyrion glanced at the Knight of Flowers, standing with the other Kingsguard. *You had best keep your sword well honed, Ser Loras.*

"With this kiss I pledge my love!" Joffrey declared in ringing tones. When Margaery echoed the words he pulled her close and kissed her long and deep. Rainbow lights danced once more about the High Septon's crown as he solemnly declared Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister and Margaery of House Tyrell to be one flesh, one heart, one soul.

Good, that's done with. Now let's get back to the bloody castle so I can have a piss.

Ser Loras and Ser Meryn led the procession from the sept in their white scale armor and snowy cloaks. Then came Prince Tommen, scattering rose petals from a basket before the king and queen. After the royal couple followed Queen Cersei and Lord Tyrell, then the bride's mother arm-in-arm with Lord Tywin. The Queen of Thorns tottered after them with one hand

on Ser Kevan Lannister's arm and the other on her cane, her twin guardsmen close behind her in case she fell. Next came Ser Garlan Tyrell and his lady wife, and finally it was their turn.

"My lady." Tyrion offered Sansa his arm. She took it dutifully, but he could feel her stiffness as they walked up the aisle together. She never once looked down at him.

He heard them cheering outside even before he reached the doors. The mob loved Margaery so much they were even willing to love Joffrey again. She had belonged to Renly, the handsome young prince who had loved them so well he had come back from beyond the grave to save them. And the bounty of Highgarden had come with her, flowing up the roseroad from the south. The fools didn't seem to remember that it had been Mace Tyrell who *closed* the roseroad to begin with, and made the bloody famine.

They stepped out into the crisp autumn air. "I feared we'd never escape," Tyrion quipped.

Sansa had no choice but to look at him then. "I . . . yes, my lord. As you say." She looked sad. "It was such a beautiful ceremony, though."

As ours was not. "It was long, I'll say that much. I need to return to the castle for a good piss." Tyrion rubbed the stump of his nose. "Would that I'd contrived some mission to take me out of the city. Littlefinger was the clever one."

Joffrey and Margaery stood surrounded by Kingsguard atop the steps that fronted on the broad marble plaza. Ser Addam and his gold cloaks held back the crowd, while the statue of King Baelor the Blessed gazed down on them benevolently. Tyrion had no choice but to queue up with the rest to offer congratulations. He kissed Margaery's fingers and wished her every happiness. Thankfully, there were others behind them waiting their turn, so they did not need to linger long.

Their litter had been sitting in the sun, and it was very warm inside the curtains. As they lurched into motion, Tyrion reclined on an elbow while Sansa sat staring at her hands. *She is just as comely as the Tyrell girl.* Her hair was a rich autumn auburn, her eyes a deep Tully blue. Grief had given her a haunted, vulnerable look; if anything, it had only made her more beautiful. He wanted to reach her, to break through the armor of her

courtesy. Was that what made him speak? Or just the need to distract himself from the fullness in his bladder?

“I had been thinking that when the roads are safe again, we might journey to Casterly Rock.” *Far from Joffrey and my sister.* The more he thought about what Joff had done to *Lives of Four Kings*, the more it troubled him. *There was a message there, oh yes.* “It would please me to show you the Golden Gallery and the Lion’s Mouth, and the Hall of Heroes where Jaime and I played as boys. You can hear thunder from below where the sea comes in . . .”

She raised her head slowly. He knew what she was seeing; the swollen brutish brow, the raw stump of his nose, his crooked pink scar and mismatched eyes. Her own eyes were big and blue and empty. “I shall go wherever my lord husband wishes.”

“I had hoped it might please you, my lady.”

“It will please me to please my lord.”

His mouth tightened. *What a pathetic little man you are. Did you think babbling about the Lion’s Mouth would make her smile? When have you ever made a woman smile but with gold?* “No, it was a foolish notion. Only a Lannister can love the Rock.”

“Yes, my lord. As you wish.”

Tyrion could hear the commons shouting out King Joffrey’s name. *In three years that cruel boy will be a man, ruling in his own right . . . and every dwarf with half his wits will be a long way from King’s Landing.* Oldtown, perhaps. Or even the Free Cities. He had always had a yen to see the Titan of Braavos. *Perhaps that would please Sansa.* Gently, he spoke of Braavos, and met a wall of sullen courtesy as icy and unyielding as the Wall he had walked once in the north. It made him weary. Then and now.

They passed the rest of the journey in silence. After a while, Tyrion found himself hoping that Sansa would say something, anything, the merest word, but she never spoke. When the litter halted in the castle yard, he let one of the grooms help her down. “We will be expected at the feast an hour hence, my lady. I will join you shortly.” He walked off stiff-legged. Across the yard, he could hear Margaery’s breathless laugh as Joffrey swept her from the saddle. *The boy will be as tall and strong as Jaime one day,* he

thought, *and I'll still be a dwarf beneath his feet. And one day he's like to make me even shorter . . .*

He found a privy and sighed gratefully as he relieved himself of the morning's wine. There were times when a piss felt near as good as a woman, and this was one. He wished he could relieve himself of his doubts and guilts half as easily.

Podrick Payne was waiting outside his chambers. "I laid out your new doublet. Not here. On your bed. In the bedchamber."

"Yes, that's where we keep the bed." Sansa would be in there, dressing for the feast. *Shae as well*. "Wine, Pod."

Tyrion drank it in his window seat, brooding over the chaos of the kitchens below. The sun had not yet touched the top of the castle wall, but he could smell breads baking and meats roasting. The guests would soon be pouring into the throne room, full of anticipation; this would be an evening of song and splendor, designed not only to unite Highgarden and Casterly Rock but to trumpet their power and wealth as a lesson to any who might still think to oppose Joffrey's rule.

But who would be mad enough to contest Joffrey's rule now, after what had befallen Stannis Baratheon and Robb Stark? There was still fighting in the riverlands, but everywhere the coils were tightening. Ser Gregor Clegane had crossed the Trident and seized the ruby ford, then captured Harrenhal almost effortlessly. Seagard had yielded to Black Walder Frey, Lord Randyll Tarly held Maidenpool, Duskendale, and the kingsroad. In the west, Ser Daven Lannister had linked up with Ser Forley Prester at the Golden Tooth for a march on Riverrun. Ser Ryman Frey was leading two thousand spears down from the Twins to join them. And Paxter Redwyne claimed his fleet would soon set sail from the Arbor, to begin the long voyage around Dorne and through the Stepstones. Stannis's Lyseni pirates would be outnumbered ten to one. The struggle that the maesters were calling the War of the Five Kings was all but at an end. Mace Tyrell had been heard complaining that Lord Tywin had left no victories for him.

"My lord?" Pod was at his side. "Will you be changing? I laid out the doublet. On your bed. For the feast."

"Feast?" said Tyrion sourly. "What feast?"

“The wedding feast.” Pod missed the sarcasm, of course. “King Joffrey and Lady Margaery. Queen Margaery, I mean.”

Tyrion resolved to get very, very drunk tonight. “Very well, young Podrick, let us go make me festive.”

Shae was helping Sansa with her hair when they entered the bedchamber. *Joy and grief*, he thought when he beheld them there together. *Laughter and tears*. Sansa wore a gown of silvery satin trimmed in vair, with dagged sleeves that almost touched the floor, lined in soft purple felt. Shae had arranged her hair artfully in a delicate silver net winking with dark purple gemstones. Tyrion had never seen her look more lovely, yet she wore sorrow on those long satin sleeves. “Lady Sansa,” he told her, “you shall be the most beautiful woman in the hall tonight.”

“My lord is too kind.”

“My lady,” said Shae wistfully. “Couldn’t I come serve at table? I so want to see the pigeons fly out of the pie.”

Sansa looked at her uncertainly. “The queen has chosen all the servers.”

“And the hall will be too crowded.” Tyrion had to bite back his annoyance. “There will be musicians strolling all through the castle, though, and tables in the outer ward with food and drink for all.” He inspected his new doublet, crimson velvet with padded shoulders and puffed sleeves slashed to show the black satin underlining. *A handsome garment. All it wants is a handsome man to wear it.* “Come, Pod, help me into this.”

He had another cup of wine as he dressed, then took his wife by the arm and escorted her from the Kitchen Keep to join the river of silk, satin, and velvet flowing toward the throne room. Some guests had gone inside to find their places on the benches. Others were milling in front of the doors, enjoying the unseasonable warmth of the afternoon. Tyrion led Sansa around the yard, to perform the necessary courtesies.

She is good at this, he thought, as he watched her tell Lord Gyles that his cough was sounding better, compliment Elinor Tyrell on her gown, and question Jalabhar Xho about wedding customs in the Summer Isles. His cousin Ser Lancel had been brought down by Ser Kevan, the first time he’d left his sickbed since the battle. *He looks ghastly*. Lancel’s hair had turned white and brittle, and he was thin as a stick. Without his father beside him

holding him up, he would surely have collapsed. Yet when Sansa praised his valor and said how good it was to see him getting strong again, both Lancel and Ser Kevan beamed. *She would have made Joffrey a good queen and a better wife if he'd had the sense to love her.* He wondered if his nephew was capable of loving anyone.

“You do look quite exquisite, child,” Lady Olenna Tyrell told Sansa when she tottered up to them in a cloth-of-gold gown that must have weighed more than she did. “The wind has been at your hair, though.” The little old woman reached up and fussed at the loose strands, tucking them back into place and straightening Sansa’s hair net. “I was very sorry to hear about your losses,” she said as she tugged and fiddled. “Your brother was a terrible traitor, I know, but if we start killing men at weddings they’ll be even more frightened of marriage than they are presently. There, that’s better.” Lady Olenna smiled. “I am pleased to say I shall be leaving for Highgarden the day after next. I have had quite enough of this smelly city, thank you. Perhaps you would like to accompany me for a little visit, whilst the men are off having their war? I shall miss my Margaery so dreadfully, and all her lovely ladies. Your company would be such sweet solace.”

“You are too kind, my lady,” said Sansa, “but my place is with my lord husband.”

Lady Olenna gave Tyrion a wrinkled, toothless smile. “Oh? Forgive a silly old woman, my lord, I did not mean to steal your lovely wife. I assumed you would be off leading a Lannister host against some wicked foe.”

“A host of dragons and stags. The master of coin must remain at court to see that all the armies are paid for.”

“To be sure. Dragons and stags, that’s very clever. And dwarf’s pennies as well. I have heard of these dwarf’s pennies. No doubt collecting those is *such* a dreadful chore.”

“I leave the collecting to others, my lady.”

“Oh, do you? I would have thought you might want to tend to it yourself. We can’t have the crown being cheated of its dwarf’s pennies, now. Can we?”

“Gods forbid.” Tyrion was beginning to wonder whether Lord Luthor Tyrell had ridden off that cliff intentionally. “If you will excuse us, Lady Olenna, it is time we were in our places.”

“Myself as well. Seventy-seven courses, I daresay. Don’t you find that a bit *excessive*, my lord? I shan’t eat more than three or four bites myself, but you and I are very little, aren’t we?” She patted Sansa’s hair again and said, “Well, off with you, child, and try to be merrier. Now where have my guardsmen gone? Left, Right, where are you? Come help me to the dais.”

Although evenfall was still an hour away, the throne room was already a blaze of light, with torches burning in every sconce. The guests stood along the tables as heralds called out the names and titles of the lords and ladies making their entrance. Pages in the royal livery escorted them down the broad central aisle. The gallery above was packed with musicians; drummers and pipers and fiddlers, strings and horns and skins.

Tyrion clutched Sansa’s arm and made the walk with a heavy waddling stride. He could feel their eyes on him, picking at the fresh new scar that had left him even uglier than he had been before. *Let them look*, he thought as he hopped up onto his seat. *Let them stare and whisper until they’ve had their fill, I will not hide myself for their sake.* The Queen of Thorns followed them in, shuffling along with tiny little steps. Tyrion wondered which of them looked more absurd, him with Sansa or the wizened little woman between her seven-foot-tall twin guardsmen.

Joffrey and Margaery rode into the throne room on matched white chargers. Pages ran before them, scattering rose petals under their hooves. The king and queen had changed for the feast as well. Joffrey wore striped black-and-crimson breeches and a cloth-of-gold doublet with black satin sleeves and onyx studs. Margaery had exchanged the demure gown that she had worn in the sept for one much more revealing, a confection in pale green samite with a tight-laced bodice that bared her shoulders and the tops of her small breasts. Unbound, her soft brown hair tumbled over her white shoulders and down her back almost to her waist. Around her brows was a slim golden crown. Her smile was shy and sweet. *A lovely girl*, thought Tyrion, *and a kinder fate than my nephew deserves.*

The Kingsguard escorted them onto the dais, to the seats of honor beneath the shadow of the Iron Throne, draped for the occasion in long silk streamers of Baratheon gold, Lannister crimson, and Tyrell green. Cersei embraced Margaery and kissed her cheeks. Lord Tywin did the same, and then Lancel and Ser Kevan. Joffrey received loving kisses from the bride's father and his two new brothers, Loras and Garlan. No one seemed in any great rush to kiss Tyrion. When the king and queen had taken their seats, the High Septon rose to lead a prayer. *At least he does not drone as badly as the last one*, Tyrion consoled himself.

He and Sansa had been seated far to the king's right, beside Ser Garlan Tyrell and his wife, the Lady Leonette. A dozen others sat closer to Joffrey, which a pricklier man might have taken for a slight, given that he had been the King's Hand only a short time past. Tyrion would have been glad if there had been a hundred.

"Let the cups be filled!" Joffrey proclaimed, when the gods had been given their due. His cupbearer poured a whole flagon of dark Arbor red into the golden wedding chalice that Lord Tyrell had given him that morning. The king had to use both hands to lift it. *"To my wife the queen!"*

"Margaery!" the hall shouted back at him. *"Margaery! Margaery! To the queen!"* A thousand cups rang together, and the wedding feast was well and truly begun. Tyrion Lannister drank with the rest, emptying his cup on that first toast and signaling for it to be refilled as soon as he was seated again.

The first dish was a creamy soup of mushrooms and buttered snails, served in gilded bowls. Tyrion had scarcely touched the breakfast, and the wine had already gone to his head, so the food was welcome. He finished quickly. *One done, seventy-six to come. Seventy-seven dishes, while there are still starving children in this city, and men who would kill for a radish. They might not love the Tyrells half so well if they could see us now.*

Sansa tasted a spoonful of soup and pushed the bowl away. "Not to your liking, my lady?" Tyrion asked.

"There's to be so much, my lord. I have a little tummy." She fiddled nervously with her hair and looked down the table to where Joffrey sat with his Tyrell queen.

Does she wish it were her in Margaery's place? Tyrion frowned. *Even a child should have better sense.* He turned away, wanting distraction, but everywhere he looked were women, fair fine beautiful happy women who belonged to other men. Margaery, of course, smiling sweetly as she and Joffrey shared a drink from the great seven-sided wedding chalice. Her mother Lady Alerie, silver-haired and handsome, still proud beside Mace Tyrell. The queen's three young cousins, bright as birds. Lord Merryweather's dark-haired Myrish wife with her big black sultry eyes. Ellaria Sand among the Dornishmen (Cersei had placed them at their own table, just below the dais in a place of high honor but as far from the Tyrells as the width of the hall would allow), laughing at something the Red Viper had told her.

And there was one woman, sitting almost at the foot of the third table on the left . . . the wife of one of the Fossoways, he thought, and heavy with his child. Her delicate beauty was in no way diminished by her belly, nor was her pleasure in the food and frolics. Tyrion watched as her husband fed her morsels off his plate. They drank from the same cup, and would kiss often and unpredictably. Whenever they did, his hand would gently rest upon her stomach, a tender and protective gesture.

He wondered what Sansa would do if he leaned over and kissed her right now. *Flinch away, most likely.* Or be brave and suffer through it, as was her duty. *She is nothing if not dutiful, this wife of mine.* If he told her that he wished to have her maidenhead tonight, she would suffer that dutifully as well, and weep no more than she had to.

He called for more wine. By the time he got it, the second course was being served, a pstry coffyn filled with pork, pine nuts, and eggs. Sansa ate no more than a bite of hers, as the heralds were summoning the first of the seven singers.

Grey-bearded Hamish the Harper announced that he would perform "for the ears of gods and men, a song ne'er heard before in all the Seven Kingdoms." He called it "Lord Renly's Ride."

His fingers moved across the strings of the high harp, filling the throne room with sweet sound. "*From his throne of bones the Lord of Death looked down on the murdered lord,*" Hamish began, and went on to tell how

Renly, repenting his attempt to usurp his nephew's crown, had defied the Lord of Death himself and crossed back to the land of the living to defend the realm against his brother.

And for this poor Symon wound up in a bowl of brown, Tyrion mused. Queen Margaery was teary-eyed by the end, when the shade of brave Lord Renly flew to Highgarden to steal one last look at his true love's face. "Renly Baratheon never repented of anything in his life," the Imp told Sansa, "but if I'm any judge, Hamish just won himself a gilded lute."

The Harper also gave them several more familiar songs. "A Rose of Gold" was for the Tyrells, no doubt, as "The Rains of Castamere" was meant to flatter his father. "Maiden, Mother, and Crone" delighted the High Septon, and "My Lady Wife" pleased all the little girls with romance in their hearts, and no doubt some little boys as well. Tyrion listened with half a ear, as he sampled sweetcorn fritters and hot oatbread baked with bits of date, apple, and orange, and gnawed on the rib of a wild boar.

Thereafter dishes and diversions succeeded one another in a staggering profusion, buoyed along upon a flood of wine and ale. Hamish left them, his place taken by a smallish elderly bear who danced clumsily to pipe and drum while the wedding guests ate trout cooked in a crust of crushed almonds. Moon Boy mounted his stilts and strode around the tables in pursuit of Lord Tyrell's ludicrously fat fool Butterbumps, and the lords and ladies sampled roast herons and cheese-and-onion pies. A troupe of Pentoshi tumblers performed cartwheels and handstands, balanced platters on their bare feet, and stood upon each other's shoulders to form a pyramid. Their feats were accompanied by crabs boiled in fiery eastern spices, trenchers filled with chunks of chopped mutton stewed in almond milk with carrots, raisins, and onions, and fish tarts fresh from the ovens, served so hot they burned the fingers.

Then the heralds summoned another singer; Collio Quaynis of Tyrosh, who had a vermilion beard and an accent as ludicrous as Symon had promised. Collio began with his version of "The Dance of the Dragons," which was more properly a song for two singers, male and female. Tyrion suffered through it with a double helping of honey-ginger partridge and several cups of wine. A haunting ballad of two dying lovers amidst the Doom of Valyria might have pleased the hall more if Collio had not sung it

in High Valyrian, which most of the guests could not speak. But “Bessa the Barmaid” won them back with its ribald lyrics. Peacocks were served in their plumage, roasted whole and stuffed with dates, while Collio summoned a drummer, bowed low before Lord Tywin, and launched into “The Rains of Castamere.”

If I have to hear seven versions of that, I may go down to Flea Bottom and apologize to the stew. Tyrion turned to his wife. “So which did you prefer?”

Sansa blinked at him. “My lord?”

“The singers. Which did you prefer?”

“I . . . I’m sorry, my lord. I was not listening.”

She was not eating, either. “Sansa, is aught amiss?” He spoke without thinking, and instantly felt the fool. *All her kin are slaughtered and she’s wed to me, and I wonder what’s amiss.*

“No, my lord.” She looked away from him, and feigned an unconvincing interest in Moon Boy pelting Ser Dontos with dates.

Four master pyromancers conjured up beasts of living flame to tear at each other with fiery claws whilst the serving men ladeled out bowls of blandissory, a mixture of beef broth and boiled wine sweetened with honey and dotted with blanched almonds and chunks of capon. Then came some strolling pipers and clever dogs and sword swallows, with buttered pease, chopped nuts, and slivers of swan poached in a sauce of saffron and peaches. (“Not swan again,” Tyrion muttered, remembering his supper with his sister on the eve of battle.) A juggler kept a half-dozen swords and axes whirling through the air as skewers of blood sausage were brought sizzling to the tables, a juxtaposition that Tyrion thought passing clever, though not perhaps in the best of taste.

The heralds blew their trumpets. “To sing for the golden lute,” one cried, “we give you Galyeon of Cuy.”

Galyeon was a big barrel-chested man with a black beard, a bald head, and a thunderous voice that filled every corner of the throne room. He brought no fewer than six musicians to play for him. “Noble lords and ladies fair, I sing but one song for you this night,” he announced. “It is the

song of the Blackwater, and how a realm was saved.” The drummer began a slow ominous beat.

“The dark lord brooded high in his tower,” Galyeon began, *“in a castle as black as the night.”*

“Black was his hair and black was his soul,” the musicians chanted in unison. A flute came in.

“He feasted on bloodlust and envy, and filled his cup full up with spite,” sang Galyeon. *“My brother once ruled seven kingdoms, he said to his harridan wife. I’ll take what was his and make it all mine. Let his son feel the point of my knife.”*

“A brave young boy with hair of gold,” his players chanted, as a woodharp and a fiddle began to play.

“If I am ever Hand again, the first thing I’ll do is hang all the singers,” said Tyrion, too loudly.

Lady Leonette laughed lightly beside him, and Ser Garlan leaned over to say, “A valiant deed unsung is no less valiant.”

“The dark lord assembled his legions, they gathered around him like crows. And thirsty for blood they boarded their ships . . .”

“. . . and cut off poor Tyrion’s nose,” Tyrion finished.

Lady Leonette giggled. “Perhaps you should be a singer, my lord. You rhyme as well as this Galyeon.”

“No, my lady,” Ser Garlan said. “My lord of Lannister was made to do great deeds, not to sing of them. But for his chain and his wildfire, the foe would have been across the river. And if Tyrion’s wildlings had not slain most of Lord Stannis’s scouts, we would never have been able to take him unawares.”

His words made Tyrion feel absurdly grateful, and helped to mollify him as Galyeon sang endless verses about the valor of the boy king and his mother, the golden queen.

“She never did that,” Sansa blurted out suddenly.

“Never believe anything you hear in a song, my lady.” Tyrion summoned a serving man to refill their wine cups.

Soon it was full night outside the tall windows, and still Galyeon sang on. His song had seventy-seven verses, though it seemed more like a thousand. *One for every guest in the hall.* Tyrion drank his way through the last twenty or so, to help resist the urge to stuff mushrooms in his ears. By the time the singer had taken his bows, some of the guests were drunk enough to begin providing unintentional entertainments of their own. Grand Maester Pycelle fell asleep while dancers from the Summer Isles swirled and spun in robes made of bright feathers and smoky silk. Roundels of elk stuffed with ripe blue cheese were being brought out when one of Lord Rowan's knights stabbed a Dornishman. The gold cloaks dragged them both away, one to a cell to rot and the other to get sewn up by Maester Ballabar.

Tyrion was toying with a leche of brawn, spiced with cinnamon, cloves, sugar, and almond milk, when King Joffrey lurched suddenly to his feet. "*Bring on my royal jousters!*" he shouted in a voice thick with wine, clapping his hands together.

My nephew is drunker than I am, Tyrion thought as the gold cloaks opened the great doors at the end of the hall. From where he sat, he could only see the tops of two striped lances as a pair of riders entered side by side. A wave of laughter followed them down the center aisle toward the king. *They must be riding ponies,* he concluded . . . until they came into full view.

The jousters were a pair of dwarfs. One was mounted on an ugly grey dog, long of leg and heavy of jaw. The other rode an immense spotted sow. Painted wooden armor clattered and clacked as the little knights bounced up and down in their saddles. Their shields were bigger than they were, and they wrestled manfully with their lances as they clomped along, swaying this way and that and eliciting gusts of mirth. One knight was all in gold, with a black stag painted on his shield; the other wore grey and white, and bore a wolf device. Their mounts were barded likewise.

Tyrion glanced along the dais at all the laughing faces. Joffrey was red and breathless, Tommen was hooting and hopping up and down in his seat, Cersei was chuckling politely, and even Lord Tywin looked mildly amused. Of all those at the high table, only Sansa Stark was not smiling. He could have loved her for that, but if truth be told the Stark girl's eyes were far away, as if she had not even seen the ludicrous riders loping toward her.

The dwarfs are not to blame, Tyrion decided. When they are done, I shall compliment them and give them a fat purse of silver. And come the morrow, I will find whoever planned this little diversion and arrange for a different sort of thanks.

When the dwarfs reined up beneath the dais to salute the king, the wolf knight dropped his shield. As he leaned over to grab for it, the stag knight lost control of his heavy lance and slammed him across the back. The wolf knight fell off his pig, and his lance tumbled over and boinked his foe on the head. They both wound up on the floor in a great tangle. When they rose, both tried to mount the dog. Much shouting and shoving followed. Finally they regained their saddles, only mounted on each other's steed, holding the wrong shield and facing backward.

It took some time to sort that out, but in the end they spurred to opposite ends of the hall, and wheeled about for the tilt. As the lords and ladies guffawed and giggled, the little men came together with a crash and a clatter, and the wolf knight's lance struck the helm of the stag knight and knocked his head clean off. It spun through the air spattering blood to land in the lap of Lord Gyles. The headless dwarf careened around the tables, flailing his arms. Dogs barked, women shrieked, and Moon Boy made a great show of swaying perilously back and forth on his stilts, until Lord Gyles pulled a dripping red melon out of the shattered helm, at which point the stag knight poked his face up out of his armor, and another storm of laughter rocked the hall. The knights waited for it to die, circled around each other trading colorful insults, and were about to separate for another joust when the dog threw its rider to the floor and mounted the sow. The huge pig squealed in distress, while the wedding guests squealed with laughter, especially when the stag knight leapt onto the wolf knight, let down his wooden breeches, and started to pump away frantically at the other's nether portions.

"I yield, I yield," the dwarf on the bottom screamed. "Good ser, put up your sword!"

"I would, I would, if you'll stop moving the sheath!" the dwarf on the top replied, to the merriment of all.

Joffrey was snorting wine from both nostrils. Gasping, he lurched to his feet, almost knocking over his tall two-handed chalice. “A champion,” he shouted. “We have a champion!” The hall began to quiet when it was seen that the king was speaking. The dwarfs untangled, no doubt anticipating the royal thanks. “Not a *true* champion, though,” said Joff. “A true champion defeats *all* challengers.” The king climbed up on the table. “Who else will challenge our tiny champion?” With a gleeful smile, he turned toward Tyrion. “*Uncle!* You’ll defend the honor of my realm, won’t you? You can ride the pig!”

The laughter crashed over him like a wave. Tyrion Lannister did not remember rising, nor climbing on his chair, but he found himself standing on the table. The hall was a torchlit blur of leering faces. He twisted his face into the most hideous mockery of a smile the Seven Kingdoms had ever seen. “Your Grace,” he called, “I’ll ride the pig . . . but only if you ride the dog!”

Joff scowled, confused. “Me? I’m no dwarf. Why me?”

Stepped right into the cut, Joff. “Why, you’re the only man in the hall that I’m certain of defeating!”

He could not have said which was sweeter; the instant of shocked silence, the gale of laughter that followed, or the look of blind rage on his nephew’s face. The dwarf hopped back to the floor well satisfied, and by the time he looked back Ser Osmund and Ser Meryn were helping Joff climb down as well. When he noticed Cersei glaring at him, Tyrion blew her a kiss.

It was a relief when the musicians began to play. The tiny jousts led dog and sow from the hall, the guests returned to their trenchers of brawn, and Tyrion called for another cup of wine. But suddenly he felt Ser Garlan’s hand on his sleeve. “My lord, beware,” the knight warned. “The king.”

Tyrion turned in his seat. Joffrey was almost upon him, red-faced and staggering, wine slopping over the rim of the great golden wedding chalice he carried in both hands. “Your Grace,” was all he had time to say before the king upended the chalice over his head. The wine washed down over his face in a red torrent. It drenched his hair, stung his eyes, burned in his wound, ran down his cheeks, and soaked the velvet of his new doublet. “How do you like that, Imp?” Joffrey mocked.

Tyrion's eyes were on fire. He dabbed at his face with the back of a sleeve and tried to blink the world back into clarity. "That was ill done, Your Grace," he heard Ser Garlan say quietly.

"Not at all, Ser Garlan." Tyrion dare not let this grow any uglier than it was, not here, with half the realm looking on. "Not every king would think to honor a humble subject by serving him from his own royal chalice. A pity the wine spilled."

"It didn't *spill*," said Joffrey, too graceless to take the retreat Tyrion offered him. "And I wasn't *serving* you, either."

Queen Margaery appeared suddenly at Joffrey's elbow. "My sweet king," the Tyrell girl entreated, "come, return to your place, there's another singer waiting."

"Alaric of Eysen," said Lady Olenna Tyrell, leaning on her cane and taking no more notice of the wine-soaked dwarf than her granddaughter had done. "I do so hope he plays us 'The Rains of Castamere.' It has been an hour, I've forgotten how it goes."

"Ser Addam has a toast he wants to make as well," said Margaery. "Your Grace, please."

"I have no wine," Joffrey declared. "How can I drink a toast if I have no wine? Uncle Imp, you can serve me. Since you won't joust you'll be my cupbearer."

"I would be most honored."

"*It's not meant to be an honor!*" Joffrey screamed. "Bend down and pick up my chalice." Tyrion did as he was bid, but as he reached for the handle Joffrey kicked the chalice through his legs. "Pick it *up*! Are you as clumsy as you are ugly?" He had to crawl under the table to find the thing. "Good, now fill it with wine." He claimed a flagon from a serving girl and filled the goblet three-quarters full. "No, on your knees, dwarf." Kneeling, Tyrion raised up the heavy cup, wondering if he was about to get a second bath. But Joffrey took the wedding chalice one-handed, drank deep, and set it on the table. "You can get up now, Uncle."

His legs cramped as he tried to rise, and almost spilled him again. Tyrion had to grab hold of a chair to steady himself. Ser Garlan lent him a hand.

Joffrey laughed, and Cersei as well. Then others. He could not see who, but he heard them.

“Your Grace.” Lord Tywin’s voice was impeccably correct. “They are bringing in the pie. Your sword is needed.”

“The pie?” Joffrey took his queen by the hand. “Come, my lady, it’s the pie.”

The guests stood, shouting and applauding and smashing their wine cups together as the great pie made its slow way down the length of the hall, wheeled along by a half-dozen beaming cooks. Two yards across it was, crusty and golden brown, and they could hear squeaks and thumpings coming from inside it.

Tyrian pulled himself back into his chair. All he needed now was for a dove to shit on him and his day would be complete. The wine had soaked through his doublet and smallclothes, and he could feel the wetness against his skin. He ought to change, but no one was permitted to leave the feast until the time came for the bedding ceremony. That was still a good twenty or thirty dishes off, he judged.

King Joffrey and his queen met the pie below the dais. As Joff drew his sword, Margaery laid a hand on his arm to restrain him. “Widow’s Wail was not meant for slicing pies.”

“True.” Joffrey lifted his voice. “Ser Ilyn, your sword!”

From the shadows at the back of the hall, Ser Ilyn Payne appeared. *The specter at the feast*, thought Tyrion as he watched the King’s Justice stride forward, gaunt and grim. He had been too young to have known Ser Ilyn before he’d lost his tongue. *He would have been a different man in those days, but now the silence is as much a part of him as those hollow eyes, that rusty chainmail shirt, and the greatsword on his back.*

Ser Ilyn bowed before the king and queen, reached back over his shoulder, and drew forth six feet of ornate silver bright with runes. He knelt to offer the huge blade to Joffrey, hilt first; points of red fire winked from ruby eyes on the pommel, a chunk of dragonglass carved in the shape of a grinning skull.

Sansa stirred in her seat. “What sword is that?”

Tyrion's eyes still stung from the wine. He blinked and looked again. Ser Ilyn's greatsword was as long and wide as Ice, but it was too silvery-bright; Valyrian steel had a darkness to it, a smokiness in its soul. Sansa clutched his arm. "What has Ser Ilyn done with my father's sword?"

I should have sent Ice back to Robb Stark, Tyrion thought. He glanced at his father, but Lord Tywin was watching the king.

Joffrey and Margaery joined hands to lift the greatsword and swung it down together in a silvery arc. When the piecrust broke, the doves burst forth in a swirl of white feathers, scattering in every direction, flapping for the windows and the rafters. A roar of delight went up from the benches, and the fiddlers and pipers in the gallery began to play a sprightly tune. Joff took his bride in his arms, and whirled her around merrily.

A serving man placed a slice of hot pigeon pie in front of Tyrion and covered it with a spoon of lemon cream. The pigeons were well and truly cooked in *this* pie, but he found them no more appetizing than the white ones fluttering about the hall. Sansa was not eating either. "You're deathly pale, my lady," Tyrion said. "You need a breath of cool air, and I need a fresh doublet." He stood and offered her his hand. "Come."

But before they could make their retreat, Joffrey was back. "Uncle, where are you going? You're my cupbearer, remember?"

"I need to change into fresh garb, Your Grace. May I have your leave?"

"No. I like the look of you this way. Serve me my wine."

The king's chalice was on the table where he'd left it. Tyrion had to climb back onto his chair to reach it. Joff yanked it from his hands and drank long and deep, his throat working as the wine ran purple down his chin. "My lord," Margaery said, "we should return to our places. Lord Buckler wants to toast us."

"My uncle hasn't eaten his pigeon pie." Holding the chalice one-handed, Joff jammed his other into Tyrion's pie. "It's ill luck not to eat the pie," he scolded as he filled his mouth with hot spiced pigeon. "See, it's good." Spitting out flakes of crust, he coughed and helped himself to another fistful. "Dry, though. Needs washing down." Joff took a swallow of wine and coughed again, more violently. "I want to see, *kof*, see you ride that, *kof kof*, pig, Uncle. I want . . ." His words broke up in a fit of coughing.

Margaery looked at him with concern. “Your Grace?”

“It’s, *kof*, the pie, noth—*kof*, pie.” Joff took another drink, or tried to, but all the wine came spewing back out when another spate of coughing doubled him over. His face was turning red. “I, *kof*, I can’t, *kof kof kof kof* . . .” The chalice slipped from his hand and dark red wine went running across the dais.

“He’s choking,” Queen Margaery gasped.

Her grandmother moved to her side. “Help the poor boy!” the Queen of Thorns screeched, in a voice ten times her size. “*Dolts!* Will you all stand about gaping? *Help* your king!”

Ser Garlan shoved Tyrion aside and began to pound Joffrey on the back. Ser Osmund Kettleblack ripped open the king’s collar. A fearful high thin sound emerged from the boy’s throat, the sound of a man trying to suck a river through a reed; then it stopped, and that was more terrible still. “Turn him over!” Mace Tyrell bellowed at everyone and no one. “Turn him over, shake him by his heels!” A different voice was calling, “Water, give him some *water!*” The High Septon began to pray loudly. Grand Maester Pycelle shouted for someone to help him back to his chambers, to fetch his potions. Joffrey began to claw at his throat, his nails tearing bloody gouges in the flesh. Beneath the skin, the muscles stood out hard as stone. Prince Tommen was screaming and crying.

He is going to die, Tyrion realized. He felt curiously calm, though pandemonium raged all about him. They were pounding Joff on the back again, but his face was only growing darker. Dogs were barking, children were wailing, men were shouting useless advice at each other. Half the wedding guests were on their feet, some shoving at each other for a better view, others rushing for the doors in their haste to get away.

Ser Meryn pried the king’s mouth open to jam a spoon down his throat. As he did, the boy’s eyes met Tyrion’s. *He has Jaime’s eyes*. Only he had never seen Jaime look so scared. *The boy’s only thirteen*. Joffrey was making a dry clacking noise, trying to speak. His eyes bulged white with terror, and he lifted a hand . . . reaching for his uncle, or pointing . . . *Is he begging my forgiveness, or does he think I can save him?* “Noooo,” Cersei wailed, “Father help him, someone help him, my son, my *son* . . .”

Tyrion found himself thinking of Robb Stark. *My own wedding is looking much better in hindsight.* He looked to see how Sansa was taking this, but there was so much confusion in the hall that he could not find her. But his eyes fell on the wedding chalice, forgotten on the floor. He went and scooped it up. There was still a half-inch of deep purple wine in the bottom of it. Tyrion considered it a moment, then poured it on the floor.

Margaery Tyrell was weeping in her grandmother's arms as the old lady said, "Be brave, be brave." Most of the musicians had fled, but one last flutist in the gallery was blowing a dirge. In the rear of the throne room scuffling had broken out around the doors, and the guests were trampling on each other. Ser Addam's gold cloaks moved in to restore order. Guests were rushing headlong out into the night, some weeping, some stumbling and retching, others white with fear. It occurred to Tyrion belatedly that it might be wise to leave himself.

When he heard Cersei's scream, he knew that it was over.

I should leave. Now. Instead he waddled toward her.

His sister sat in a puddle of wine, cradling her son's body. Her gown was torn and stained, her face white as chalk. A thin black dog crept up beside her, sniffing at Joffrey's corpse. "The boy is gone, Cersei," Lord Tywin said. He put his gloved hand on his daughter's shoulder as one of his guardsmen shooed away the dog. "Unhand him now. Let him go." She did not hear. It took two Kingsguard to pry loose her fingers, so the body of King Joffrey Baratheon could slide limp and lifeless to the floor.

The High Septon knelt beside him. "Father Above, judge our good King Joffrey justly," he intoned, beginning the prayer for the dead. Margaery Tyrell began to sob, and Tyrion heard her mother Lady Alerie saying, "He choked, sweetling. He choked on the pie. It was naught to do with you. He choked. We all saw."

"He did not choke." Cersei's voice was sharp as Ser Ilyn's sword. "My son was poisoned." She looked to the white knights standing helplessly around her. "Kingsguard, do your duty."

"My lady?" said Ser Loras Tyrell, uncertain.

"Arrest my brother," she commanded him. "He did this, the dwarf. Him and his little wife. They killed my son. Your king. *Take them!* Take them

both!”