



TYRION

The eunuch was humming tunelessly to himself as he came through the door, dressed in flowing robes of peach-colored silk and smelling of lemons. When he saw Tyrion seated by the hearth, he stopped and grew very still. “My lord Tyrion,” came out in a squeak, punctuated by a nervous giggle.

“So you *do* remember me? I had begun to wonder.”

“It is so *very* good to see you looking so strong and well.” Varys smiled his slimiest smile. “Though I confess, I had not thought to find you in mine own humble chambers.”

“They are humble. Excessively so, in truth.” Tyrion had waited until Varys was summoned by his father before slipping in to pay him a visit. The eunuch’s apartments were sparse and small, three snug windowless chambers under the north wall. “I’d hoped to discover bushel baskets of juicy secrets to while away the waiting, but there’s not a paper to be found.” He’d searched for hidden passages too, knowing the Spider must have ways of coming and going unseen, but those had proved equally elusive. “There was *water* in your flagon, gods have mercy,” he went on, “your sleeping cell is no wider than a coffin, and that bed . . . is it actually made of stone, or does it only feel that way?”

Varys closed the door and barred it. “I am plagued with backaches, my lord, and prefer to sleep upon a hard surface.”

“I would have taken you for a featherbed man.”

“I am full of surprises. Are you cross with me for abandoning you after the battle?”

“It made me think of you as one of my family.”

“It was not for want of love, my good lord. I have such a delicate disposition, and your scar is so dreadful to look upon . . .” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “Your poor nose . . .”

Tyrion rubbed irritably at the scab. “Perhaps I should have a new one made of gold. What sort of nose would you suggest, Varys? One like yours, to smell out secrets? Or should I tell the goldsmith that I want my father’s nose?” He smiled. “My noble father labors so diligently that I scarce see him anymore. Tell me, is it true that he’s restoring Grand Maester Pycelle to the small council?”

“It is, my lord.”

“Do I have my sweet sister to thank for that?” Pycelle had been his sister’s creature; Tyrion had stripped the man of office, beard, and dignity, and flung him down into a black cell.

“Not at all, my lord. Thank the archmaesters of Oldtown, those who wished to insist on Pycelle’s restoration on the grounds that only the Conclave may make or unmake a Grand Maester.”

Bloody fools, thought Tyrion. “I seem to recall that Maegor the Cruel’s headsman unmade three with his axe.”

“Quite true,” Varys said. “And the second Aegon fed Grand Maester Gerardys to his dragon.”

“Alas, I am quite dragonless. I suppose I could have dipped Pycelle in wildfire and set him ablaze. Would the Citadel have preferred that?”

“Well, it would have been more in keeping with tradition.” The eunuch tittered. “Thankfully, wiser heads prevailed, and the Conclave accepted the fact of Pycelle’s dismissal and set about choosing his successor. After giving due consideration to Maester Turquin the cordwainer’s son and Maester Erreck the hedge knight’s bastard, and thereby demonstrating to their own satisfaction that ability counts for more than birth in their order,

the Conclave was on the verge of sending us Maester Gormon, a Tyrell of Highgarden. When I told your lord father, he acted at once.”

The Conclave met in Oldtown behind closed doors, Tyrion knew; its deliberations were supposedly a secret. *So Varys has little birds in the Citadel too.* “I see. So my father decided to nip the rose before it bloomed.” He had to chuckle. “Pycelle is a toad. But better a Lannister toad than a Tyrell toad, no?”

“Grand Maester Pycelle has always been a good friend to your House,” Varys said sweetly. “Perhaps it will console you to learn that Ser Boros Blount is also being restored.”

Cersei had stripped Ser Boros of his white cloak for failing to die in the defense of Prince Tommen when Bronn had seized the boy on the Rosby road. The man was no friend of Tyrion’s, but after that he likely hated Cersei almost as much. *I suppose that’s something.* “Blount is a blustering coward,” he said amiably.

“Is he? Oh dear. Still, the knights of the Kingsguard *do* serve for life, traditionally. Perhaps Ser Boros will prove braver in future. He will no doubt remain very loyal.”

“To my father,” said Tyrion pointedly.

“While we are on the subject of the Kingsguard . . . I wonder, could this delightfully unexpected visit of yours happen to concern Ser Boros’s fallen brother, the gallant Ser Mandon Moore?” The eunuch stroked a powdered cheek. “Your man Bronn seems most interested in him of late.”

Bronn had turned up all he could on Ser Mandon, but no doubt Varys knew a deal more . . . should he choose to share it. “The man seems to have been quite friendless,” Tyrion said carefully.

“Sadly,” said Varys, “oh, sadly. You might find some kin if you turned over enough stones back in the Vale, but here . . . Lord Arryn brought him to King’s Landing and Robert gave him his white cloak, but neither loved him much, I fear. Nor was he the sort the smallfolk cheer in tourneys, despite his undoubted prowess. Why, even his brothers of the Kingsguard never warmed to him. Ser Barristan was once heard to say that the man had no friend but his sword and no life but duty . . . but you know, I do not think Selmy meant it altogether as praise. Which is queer when you consider it, is

it not? Those are the very qualities we seek in our Kingsguard, it could be said—men who live not for themselves, but for their king. By those lights, our brave Ser Mandon was the perfect white knight. And he died as a knight of the Kingsguard ought, with sword in hand, defending one of the king's own blood." The eunuch gave him a slimy smile and watched him sharply.

Trying to murder one of the king's own blood, you mean. Tyrion wondered if Varys knew rather more than he was saying. Nothing he'd just heard was new to him; Bronn had brought back much the same reports. He needed a link to Cersei, some sign that Ser Mandon had been his sister's catspaw. *What we want is not always what we get*, he reflected bitterly, which reminded him . . .

"It is not Ser Mandon who brings me here."

"To be sure." The eunuch crossed the room to his flagon of water. "May I serve you, my lord?" he asked as he filled a cup.

"Yes. But not with water." He folded his hands together. "I want you to bring me Shae."

Varys took a drink. "Is that wise, my lord? The dear sweet child. It would be such a shame if your father hanged her."

It did not surprise him that Varys knew. "No, it's not wise, it's bloody madness. I want to see her one last time, before I send her away. I cannot abide having her so close."

"I understand."

How could you? Tyrion had seen her only yesterday, climbing the serpentine steps with a pail of water. He had watched as a young knight had offered to carry the heavy pail. The way she had touched his arm and smiled for him had tied Tyrion's guts into knots. They passed within inches of each other, him descending and her climbing, so close that he could smell the clean fresh scent of her hair. "M'lord," she'd said to him, with a little curtsy, and he wanted to reach out and grab her and kiss her right there, but all he could do was nod stiffly and waddle on past. "I have seen her several times," he told Varys, "but I dare not speak to her. I suspect that all my movements are being watched."

"You are wise to suspect so, my good lord."

“Who?” He cocked his head.

“The Kettleblacks report frequently to your sweet sister.”

“When I think of how much coin I paid those wretched . . . do you think there’s any chance that more gold might win them away from Cersei?”

“There is always a chance, but I should not care to wager on the likelihood. They are knights now, all three, and your sister has promised them further advancement.” A wicked little titter burst from the eunuch’s lips. “And the eldest, Ser Osmund of the Kingsguard, dreams of certain other . . . *favors* . . . as well. You can match the queen coin for coin, I have no doubt, but she has a second purse that is quite inexhaustible.”

Seven hells, thought Tyrion. “Are you suggesting that Cersei’s fucking Osmund Kettleblack?”

“Oh, dear me, no, that would be dreadfully dangerous, don’t you think? No, the queen only *hints* . . . perhaps on the morrow, or when the wedding’s done . . . and then a smile, a whisper, a ribald jest . . . a breast brushing lightly against his sleeve as they pass . . . and yet it seems to serve. But what would a eunuch know of such things?” The tip of his tongue ran across his lower lip like a shy pink animal.

If I could somehow push them beyond sly fondling, arrange for Father to catch them abed together . . . Tyrion fingered the scab on his nose. He did not see how it could be done, but perhaps some plan would come to him later. “Are the Kettleblacks the only ones?”

“Would that were true, my lord. I fear there are many eyes upon you. You are . . . how shall we say? *Conspicuous*? And not well loved, it grieves me to tell you. Janos Slynt’s sons would gladly inform on you to avenge their father, and our sweet Lord Petyr has friends in half the brothels of King’s Landing. Should you be so unwise as to visit any of them, he will know at once, and your lord father soon thereafter.”

It’s even worse than I feared. “And my father? Who does he have spying on me?”

This time the eunuch laughed aloud. “Why, me, my lord.”

Tyrion laughed as well. He was not so great a fool as to trust Varys any further than he had to—but the eunuch already knew enough about Shae to

get her well and thoroughly hanged. “You will bring Shae to me through the walls, hidden from all these eyes. As you have done before.”

Varys wrung his hands. “Oh, my lord, nothing would please me more, but . . . King Maegor wanted no rats in his own walls, if you take my meaning. He did require a means of secret egress, should he ever be trapped by his enemies, but that door does not connect with any other passages. I can steal your Shae away from Lady Lollys for a time, to be sure, but I have no way to bring her to your bedchamber without us being seen.”

“Then bring her somewhere else.”

“But where? There is no safe place.”

“There is.” Tyrion grinned. “Here. It’s time to put that rock-hard bed of yours to better use, I think.”

The eunuch’s mouth opened. Then he giggled. “Lollys tires easily these days. She is great with child. I imagine she will be safely asleep by moonrise.”

Tyrion hopped down from the chair. “Moonrise, then. See that you lay in some wine. And two clean cups.”

Varys bowed. “It shall be as my lord commands.”

The rest of the day seemed to creep by as slow as a worm in molasses. Tyrion climbed to the castle library and tried to distract himself with Beldecar’s *History of the Rhoynish Wars*, but he could hardly see the elephants for imagining Shae’s smile. Come the afternoon, he put the book aside and called for a bath. He scrubbed himself until the water grew cool, and then had Pod even out his whiskers. His beard was a trial to him; a tangle of yellow, white, and black hairs, patchy and coarse, it was seldom less than unsightly, but it did serve to conceal some of his face, and that was all to the good.

When he was as clean and pink and trimmed as he was like to get, Tyrion looked over his wardrobe, and chose a pair of tight satin breeches in Lannister crimson and his best doublet, the heavy black velvet with the lion’s head studs. He would have donned his chain of golden hands as well, if his father hadn’t stolen it while he lay dying. It was not until he was dressed that he realized the depths of his folly. *Seven hells, dwarf, did you*

lose all your sense along with your nose? Anyone who sees you is going to wonder why you've put on your court clothes to visit the eunuch. Cursing, Tyrion stripped and dressed again, in simpler garb; black woolen breeches, an old white tunic, and a faded brown leather jerkin. *It doesn't matter,* he told himself as he waited for moonrise. *Whatever you wear, you're still a dwarf. You'll never be as tall as that knight on the steps, him with his long straight legs and hard stomach and wide manly shoulders.*

The moon was peeping over the castle wall when he told Podrick Payne that he was going to pay a call on Varys. "Will you be long, my lord?" the boy asked.

"Oh, I hope so."

With the Red Keep so crowded, Tyrion could not hope to go unnoticed. Ser Balon Swann stood guard on the door, and Ser Loras Tyrell on the drawbridge. He stopped to exchange pleasantries with both of them. It was strange to see the Knight of Flowers all in white when before he had always been as colorful as a rainbow. "How old are you, Ser Loras?" Tyrion asked him.

"Seventeen, my lord."

Seventeen, and beautiful, and already a legend. Half the girls in the Seven Kingdoms want to bed him, and all the boys want to be him. "If you will pardon my asking, ser—why would anyone choose to join the Kingsguard at seventeen?"

"Prince Aemon the Dragonknight took his vows at seventeen," Ser Loras said, "and your brother Jaime was younger still."

"I know their reasons. What are yours? The honor of serving beside such paragons as Meryn Trant and Boros Blount?" He gave the boy a mocking grin. "To guard the king's life, you surrender your own. You give up your lands and titles, give up hope of marriage, children . . ."

"House Tyrell continues through my brothers," Ser Loras said. "It is not necessary for a third son to wed, or breed."

"Not necessary, but some find it pleasant. What of love?"

"When the sun has set, no candle can replace it."

“Is that from a song?” Tyrion cocked his head, smiling. “Yes, you are seventeen, I see that now.”

Ser Loras tensed. “Do you mock me?”

A prickly lad. “No. If I’ve given offense, forgive me. I had my own love once, and we had a song as well.” *I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.* He bid Ser Loras a good evening and went on his way.

Near the kennels a group of men-at-arms were fighting a pair of dogs. Tyrion stopped long enough to see the smaller dog tear half the face off the larger one, and earned a few coarse laughs by observing that the loser now resembled Sandor Clegane. Then, hoping he had disarmed their suspicions, he proceeded to the north wall and down the short flight of steps to the eunuch’s meager abode. The door opened as he was lifting his hand to knock.

“Varys?” Tyrion slipped inside. “Are you there?” A single candle lit the gloom, spicing the air with the scent of jasmine.

“My lord.” A woman sidled into the light; plump, soft, matronly, with a round pink moon of a face and heavy dark curls. Tyrion recoiled. “Is something amiss?” she asked.

Varys, he realized with annoyance. “For one horrid moment I thought you’d brought me Lollys instead of Shae. Where is she?”

“Here, m’lord.” She put her hands over his eyes from behind. “Can you guess what I’m wearing?”

“Nothing?”

“Oh, you’re so *smart*,” she pouted, snatching her hands away. “How did you know?”

“You’re very beautiful in nothing.”

“Am I?” she said. “Am I truly?”

“Oh yes.”

“Then shouldn’t you be fucking me instead of talking?”

“We need to rid ourselves of Lady Varys first. I am not the sort of dwarf who likes an audience.”

“He’s gone,” Shae said.

Tyrion turned to look. It was true. The eunuch had vanished, skirts and all. *The hidden doors are here somewhere, they have to be.* That was as much as he had time to think, before Shae turned his head to kiss him. Her mouth was wet and hungry, and she did not even seem to see his scar, or the raw scab where his nose had been. Her skin was warm silk beneath his fingers. When his thumb brushed against her left nipple, it hardened at once. “Hurry,” she urged, between kisses, as his fingers went to his laces, “oh, hurry, hurry, I want you in me, in me, in me.” He did not even have time to undress properly. Shae pulled his cock out of his breeches, then pushed him down onto the floor and climbed atop him. She screamed as he pushed past her lips, and rode him wildly, moaning, “My giant, my giant, my giant,” every time she slammed down on him. Tyrion was so eager that he exploded on the fifth stroke, but Shae did not seem to mind. She smiled wickedly when she felt him spurting, and leaned forward to kiss the sweat from his brow. “My giant of Lannister,” she murmured. “Stay inside me, please. I like to feel you there.”

So Tyrion did not move, except to put his arms around her. *It feels so good to hold her, and to be held,* he thought. *How can something this sweet be a crime worth hanging her for?* “Shae,” he said, “sweetling, this must be our last time together. The danger is too great. If my lord father should find you . . .”

“I like your scar.” She traced it with her finger. “It makes you look very fierce and strong.”

He laughed. “Very ugly, you mean.”

“M’lord will never be ugly in my eyes.” She kissed the scab that covered the ragged stub of his nose.

“It’s not my face that need concern you, it’s my father—”

“He does not frighten me. Will m’lord give me back my jewels and silks now? I asked Varys if I could have them when you were hurt in the battle, but he wouldn’t give them to me. What would have become of them if you’d died?”

“I didn’t die. Here I am.”

“I know.” Shae wriggled atop him, smiling. “Just where you belong.” Her mouth turned pouty. “But how long must I go on with Lollys, now that

you're well?"

"Have you been listening?" Tyrion said. "You can stay with Lollys if you like, but it would be best if you left the city."

"I don't want to leave. You promised you'd move me into a manse again after the battle." Her cunt gave him a little squeeze, and he started to stiffen again inside her. "A Lannister always pays his debts, you said."

"Shae, gods be damned, stop that. *Listen* to me. You have to go away. The city's full of Tyrells just now, and I am closely watched. You don't understand the dangers."

"Can I come to the king's wedding feast? Lollys won't go. I told her no one's like to rape her in the king's own throne room, but she's so *stupid*." When Shae rolled off, his cock slid out of her with a soft wet sound. "Symon says there's to be a singers' tourney, and tumblers, even a fools' joust."

Tyrion had almost forgotten about Shae's thrice-damned singer. "How is it you spoke to Symon?"

"I told Lady Tanda about him, and she hired him to play for Lollys. The music calms her when the baby starts to kick. Symon says there's to be a dancing bear at the feast, and wines from the Arbor. I've never seen a bear dance."

"They do it worse than I do." It was the singer who concerned him, not the bear. One careless word in the wrong ear, and Shae would hang.

"Symon says there's to be seventy-seven courses and a hundred doves baked into a great pie," Shae gushed. "When the crust's opened, they'll all burst out and fly."

"After which they will roost in the rafters and rain down birdshit on the guests." Tyrion had suffered such wedding pies before. The doves liked to shit on *him* especially, or so he had always suspected.

"Couldn't I dress in my silks and velvets and go as a lady instead of a maidservant? No one would know I wasn't."

Everyone would know you weren't, thought Tyrion. "Lady Tanda might wonder where Lollys's bedmaid found so many jewels."

“There’s to be a thousand guests, Symon says. She’d never even see me. I’d find a place in some dark corner below the salt, but whenever you got up to go to the privy I could slip out and meet you.” She cupped his cock and stroked it gently. “I won’t wear any smallclothes under my gown, so m’lord won’t even need to unlace me.” Her fingers teased him, up and down. “Or if he liked, I could do this for him.” She took him in her mouth.

Tyrion was soon ready again. This time he lasted much longer. When he finished Shae crawled back up him and curled up naked under his arm. “You’ll let me come, won’t you?”

“Shae,” he groaned, “*it is not safe.*”

For a time she said nothing at all. Tyrion tried to speak of other things, but he met a wall of sullen courtesy as icy and unyielding as the Wall he’d once walked in the north. *Gods be good*, he thought wearily as he watched the candle burn down and begin to gutter, *how could I let this happen again, after Tysha? Am I as great a fool as my father thinks?* Gladly would he have given her the promise she wanted, and gladly walked her back to his own bedchamber on his arm to let her dress in the silks and velvets she loved so much. Had the choice been his, she could have sat beside him at Joffrey’s wedding feast, and danced with all the bears she liked. But he could not see her hang.

When the candle burned out, Tyrion disentangled himself and lit another. Then he made a round of the walls, tapping on each in turn, searching for the hidden door. Shae sat with her legs drawn up and her arms wrapped around them, watching him. Finally she said, “They’re under the bed. The secret steps.”

He looked at her, incredulous. “The bed? The bed is solid stone. It weighs half a ton.”

“There’s a place where Varys pushes, and it floats right up. I asked him how, and he said it was magic.”

“Yes.” Tyrion had to grin. “A counterweight spell.”

Shae stood. “I should go back. Sometimes the baby kicks and Lollys wakes and calls for me.”

“Varys should return shortly. He’s probably listening to every word we say.” Tyrion set the candle down. There was a wet spot on the front of his breeches, but in the darkness it ought to go unnoticed. He told Shae to dress and wait for the eunuch.

“I will,” she promised. “You are my lion, aren’t you? My giant of Lannister?”

“I am,” he said. “And you’re—”

“—your whore.” She laid a finger to his lips. “I know. I’d be your lady, but I never can. Else you’d take me to the feast. It doesn’t matter. I like being a whore for you, Tyrion. Just keep me, my lion, and keep me safe.”

“I shall,” he promised. *Fool, fool*, the voice inside him screamed. *Why did you say that? You came here to send her away!* Instead he kissed her once more.

The walk back seemed long and lonely. Podrick Payne was asleep in his trundle bed at the foot of Tyrion’s, but he woke the boy. “Bronn,” he said.

“Ser Bronn?” Pod rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Oh. Should I get him? My lord?”

“Why no, I woke you up so we could have a little chat about the way he dresses,” said Tyrion, but his sarcasm was wasted. Pod only gaped at him in confusion until he threw up his hands and said, “Yes, get him. Bring him. Now.”

The lad dressed hurriedly and all but ran from the room. *Am I really so terrifying?* Tyrion wondered, as he changed into a bedrobe and poured himself some wine.

He was on his third cup and half the night was gone before Pod finally returned, with the sellsword knight in tow. “I hope the boy had a damn good reason dragging me out of Chataya’s,” Bronn said as he seated himself.

“*Chataya’s?*” Tyrion said, annoyed.

“It’s good to be a knight. No more looking for the cheaper brothels down the street.” Bronn grinned. “Now it’s Alayaya and Marei in the same featherbed, with Ser Bronn in the middle.”

Tyrion had to bite back his annoyance. Bronn had as much right to bed Alayaya as any other man, but still . . . *I never touched her, much as I*

wanted to, but Bronn could not know that. He should have kept his cock out of her. He dare not visit Chataya's himself. If he did, Cersei would see that his father heard of it, and 'Yaya would suffer more than a whipping. He'd sent the girl a necklace of silver and jade and a pair of matching bracelets by way of apology, but other than that . . .

This is fruitless. "There is a singer who calls himself Symon Silver Tongue," Tyrion said wearily, pushing his guilt aside. "He plays for Lady Tanda's daughter sometimes."

"What of him?"

Kill him, he might have said, but the man had done nothing but sing a few songs. *And fill Shae's sweet head with visions of doves and dancing bears.* "Find him," he said instead. "Find him before someone else does."