



TYRION

Lord Tywin's chain of hands made a golden glitter against the deep wine velvet of his tunic. The Lords Tyrell, Redwyne, and Rowan gathered round him as he entered. He greeted each in turn, spoke a quiet word to Varys, kissed the High Septon's ring and Cersei's cheek, clasped the hand of Grand Maester Pycelle, and seated himself in the king's place at the head of the long table, between his daughter and his brother.

Tyrion had claimed Pycelle's old place at the foot, propped up by cushions so he could gaze down the length of the table. Dispossessed, Pycelle had moved up next to Cersei, about as far from the dwarf as he could get without claiming the king's seat. The Grand Maester was a shambling skeleton, leaning heavily on a twisted cane and shaking as he walked, a few white hairs sprouting from his long chicken's neck in place of his once-luxuriant white beard. Tyrion gazed at him without remorse.

The others had to scramble for seats: Lord Mace Tyrell, a heavy, robust man with curling brown hair and a spade-shaped beard well salted with white; Paxter Redwyne of the Arbor, stoop-shouldered and thin, his bald head fringed by tufts of orange hair; Mathis Rowan, Lord of Goldengrove, clean-shaven, stout, and sweating; the High Septon, a frail man with wispy white chin hair. *Too many strange faces*, Tyrion thought, *too many new players. The game changed while I lay rotting in my bed, and no one will tell me the rules.*

Oh, the lords had been courteous enough, though he could tell how uncomfortable it made them to look at him. “That chain of yours, that was cunning,” Mace Tyrell had said in a jolly tone, and Lord Redwyne nodded and said, “Quite so, quite so, my lord of Highgarden speaks for all of us,” and very cheerfully too.

Tell it to the people of this city, Tyrion thought bitterly. Tell it to the bloody singers, with their songs of Renly’s ghost.

His uncle Kevan had been the warmest, going so far as to kiss his cheek and say, “Lancel has told me how brave you were, Tyrion. He speaks very highly of you.”

He’d better, or I’ll have a few things to say of him. He made himself smile and say, “My good cousin is too kind. His wound is healing, I trust?”

Ser Kevan frowned. “One day he seems stronger, the next . . . it is worrisome. Your sister often visits his sickbed, to lift his spirits and pray for him.”

But is she praying that he lives, or dies? Cersei had made shameless use of their cousin, both in and out of bed; a little secret she no doubt hoped Lancel would carry to his grave now that Father was here and she no longer had need of him. *Would she go so far as to murder him, though?* To look at her today, you would never suspect Cersei was capable of such ruthlessness. She was all charm, flirting with Lord Tyrell as they spoke of Joffrey’s wedding feast, complimenting Lord Redwyne on the valor of his twins, softening gruff Lord Rowan with jests and smiles, making pious noises at the High Septon. “Shall we begin with the wedding arrangements?” she asked as Lord Tywin took his seat.

“No,” their father said. “With the war. Varys.”

The eunuch smiled a silken smile. “I have such *delicious* tidings for you all, my lords. Yesterday at dawn our brave Lord Randyll caught Robett Glover outside Duskendale and trapped him against the sea. Losses were heavy on both sides, but in the end our loyal men prevailed. Ser Helman Tallhart is reported dead, with a thousand others. Robett Glover leads the survivors back toward Harrenhal in bloody disarray, little dreaming he will find valiant Ser Gregor and his stalwarts athwart his path.”

“Gods be praised!” said Paxter Redwyne. “A great victory for King Joffrey!”

What did Joffrey have to do with it? thought Tyrion.

“And a terrible defeat for the north, certainly,” observed Littlefinger, “yet one in which Robb Stark played no part. The Young Wolf remains unbeaten in the field.”

“What do we know of Stark’s plans and movements?” asked Mathis Rowan, ever blunt and to the point.

“He has run back to Riverrun with his plunder, abandoning the castles he took in the west,” announced Lord Tywin. “Our cousin Ser Daven is reforming the remnants of his late father’s army at Lannisport. When they are ready he shall join Ser Forley Prester at the Golden Tooth. As soon as the Stark boy starts north, Ser Forley and Ser Daven will descend on Riverrun.”

“You are certain Lord Stark means to go north?” Lord Rowan asked. “Even with the ironmen at Moat Cailin?”

Mace Tyrell spoke up. “Is there anything as pointless as a king without a kingdom? No, it’s plain, the boy must abandon the riverlands, join his forces to Roose Bolton’s once more, and throw all his strength against Moat Cailin. That is what *I* would do.”

Tyrion had to bite his tongue at that. Robb Stark had won more battles in a year than the Lord of Highgarden had in twenty. Tyrell’s reputation rested on one indecisive victory over Robert Baratheon at Ashford, in a battle largely won by Lord Tarly’s van before the main host had even arrived. The siege of Storm’s End, where Mace Tyrell actually did hold the command, had dragged on a year to no result, and after the Trident was fought, the Lord of Highgarden had meekly dipped his banners to Eddard Stark.

“I ought to write Robb Stark a stern letter,” Littlefinger was saying. “I understand his man Bolton is stabling goats in *my* high hall, it’s really quite unconscionable.”

Ser Kevan Lannister cleared his throat. “As regards the Starks . . . Balon Greyjoy, who now styles himself King of the Isles and the North, has written to us offering terms of alliance.”

“He ought to be offering fealty,” snapped Cersei. “By what right does he call himself king?”

“By right of conquest,” Lord Tywin said. “King Balon has strangler’s fingers round the Neck. Robb Stark’s heirs are dead, Winterfell is fallen, and the ironmen hold Moat Cailin, Deepwood Motte, and most of the Stony Shore. King Balon’s longships command the sunset sea, and are well placed to menace Lannisport, Fair Isle, and even Highgarden, should we provoke him.”

“And if we accept this alliance?” inquired Lord Mathis Rowan. “What terms does he propose?”

“That we recognize his kingship and grant him everything north of the Neck.”

Lord Redwyne laughed. “What is there north of the Neck that any sane man would want? If Greyjoy will trade swords and sails for stone and snow, I say do it, and count ourselves lucky.”

“Truly,” agreed Mace Tyrell. “That’s what I would do. Let King Balon finish the northmen whilst we finish Stannis.”

Lord Tywin’s face gave no hint as to his feelings. “There is Lysa Arryn to deal with as well. Jon Arryn’s widow, Hoster Tully’s daughter, Catelyn Stark’s sister . . . whose husband was conspiring with Stannis Baratheon at the time of his death.”

“Oh,” said Mace Tyrell cheerfully, “women have no stomach for war. Let her be, I say, she’s not like to trouble us.”

“I agree,” said Redwyne. “The Lady Lysa took no part in the fighting, nor has she committed any overt acts of treason.”

Tyrion stirred. “She did throw me in a cell and put me on trial for my life,” he pointed out, with a certain amount of rancor. “Nor has she returned to King’s Landing to swear fealty to Joff, as she was commanded. My lords, grant me the men, and I will sort out Lysa Arryn.” He could think of nothing he would enjoy more, except perhaps strangling Cersei. Sometimes he still dreamed of the Eyrie’s sky cells, and woke drenched in cold sweat.

Mace Tyrell’s smile was jovial, but behind it Tyrion sensed contempt. “Perhaps you’d best leave the fighting to fighters,” said the Lord of

Highgarden. “Better men than you have lost great armies in the Mountains of the Moon, or shattered them against the Bloody Gate. We know your worth, my lord, no need to tempt fate.”

Tyrion pushed off his cushions, bristling, but his father spoke before he could lash back. “I have other tasks in mind for Tyrion. I believe Lord Petyr may hold the key to the Eyrie.”

“Oh, I do,” said Littlefinger, “I have it here between my legs.” There was mischief in his grey-green eyes. “My lords, with your leave, I propose to travel to the Vale and there woo and win Lady Lysa Arryn. Once I am her consort, I shall deliver you the Vale of Arryn without a drop of blood being spilled.”

Lord Rowan looked doubtful. “Would Lady Lysa have you?”

“She’s had me a few times before, Lord Mathis, and voiced no complaints.”

“Bedding,” said Cersei, “is not wedding. Even a cow like Lysa Arryn might be able to grasp the difference.”

“To be sure. It would not have been fitting for a daughter of Riverrun to marry one so far below her.” Littlefinger spread his hands. “Now, though . . . a match between the Lady of the Eyrie and the Lord of Harrenhal is not so unthinkable, is it?”

Tyrion noted the look that passed between Paxter Redwyne and Mace Tyrell. “It might serve,” Lord Rowan said, “if you are certain that you can keep the woman loyal to the King’s Grace.”

“My lords,” pronounced the High Septon, “autumn is upon us, and all men of good heart are weary of war. If Lord Baelish can bring the Vale back into the king’s peace without more shedding of blood, the gods will surely bless him.”

“But can he?” asked Lord Redwyne. “Jon Arryn’s son is Lord of the Eyrie now. The Lord Robert.”

“Only a boy,” said Littlefinger. “I will see that he grows to be Joffrey’s most loyal subject, and a fast friend to us all.”

Tyrion studied the slender man with the pointed beard and irreverent grey-green eyes. *Lord of Harrenhal an empty honor? Bugger that, Father.*

Even if he never sets foot in the castle, the title makes this match possible, as he's known all along.

"We have no lack of foes," said Ser Kevan Lannister. "If the Eyrie can be kept out of the war, all to the good. I am of a mind to see what Lord Petyr can accomplish."

Ser Kevan was his brother's vanguard in council, Tyrion knew from long experience; he never had a thought that Lord Tywin had not had first. *It has all been settled beforehand*, he concluded, *and this discussion's no more than show.*

The sheep were bleating their agreement, unaware of how neatly they'd been shorn, so it fell to Tyrion to object. "How will the crown pay its debts without Lord Petyr? He is our wizard of coin, and we have no one to replace him."

Littlefinger smiled. "My little friend is too kind. All I do is count coppers, as King Robert used to say. Any clever tradesman could do as well . . . and a Lannister, blessed with the golden touch of Casterly Rock, will no doubt far surpass me."

"A Lannister?" Tyrion had a bad feeling about this.

Lord Tywin's gold-flecked eyes met his son's mismatched ones. "You are admirably suited to the task, I believe."

"Indeed!" Ser Kevan said heartily. "I've no doubt you'll make a splendid master of coin, Tyrion."

Lord Tywin turned back to Littlefinger. "If Lysa Arryn will take you for a husband and return to the king's peace, we shall restore the Lord Robert to the honor of Warden of the East. How soon might you leave?"

"On the morrow, if the winds permit. There's a Braavosi galley standing out past the chain, taking on cargo by boat. The *Merling King*. I'll see her captain about a berth."

"You will miss the king's wedding," said Mace Tyrell.

Petyr Baelish gave a shrug. "Tides and brides wait on no man, my lord. Once the autumn storms begin the voyage will be much more hazardous. Drowning would definitely diminish my charms as a bridegroom."

Lord Tyrell chuckled. "True. Best you do not linger."

“May the gods speed you on your way,” the High Septon said. “All King’s Landing shall pray for your success.”

Lord Redwyne pinched at his nose. “May we return to the matter of the Greyjoy alliance? In my view, there is much to be said for it. Greyjoy’s longships will augment my own fleet and give us sufficient strength at sea to assault Dragonstone and end Stannis Baratheon’s pretensions.”

“King Balon’s longships are occupied for the nonce,” Lord Tywin said politely, “as are we. Greyjoy demands half the kingdom as the price of alliance, but what will he do to earn it? Fight the Starks? He is doing that already. Why should we pay for what he has given us for free? The best thing to do about our lord of Pyke is nothing, in my view. Granted enough time, a better option may well present itself. One that does not require the king to give up half his kingdom.”

Tyrion watched his father closely. *There’s something he’s not saying.* He remembered those important letters Lord Tywin had been writing, the night Tyrion had demanded Casterly Rock. *What was it he said? Some battles are won with swords and spears, others with quills and ravens . . .* He wondered who the “better option” was, and what sort of price he was demanding.

“Perhaps we ought move on to the wedding,” Ser Kevan said.

The High Septon spoke of the preparations being made at the Great Sept of Baelor, and Cersei detailed the plans she had been making for the feast. They would feed a thousand in the throne room, but many more outside in the yards. The outer and middle wards would be tented in silk, with tables of food and casks of ale for all those who could not be accommodated within the hall.

“Your Grace,” said Grand Maester Pycelle, “in regard to the number of guests . . . we have had a raven from Sunspear. Three hundred Dornishmen are riding toward King’s Landing as we speak, and hope to arrive before the wedding.”

“How do they come?” asked Mace Tyrell gruffly. “They have not asked leave to cross *my* lands.” His thick neck had turned a dark red, Tyrion noted. Dornishmen and Highgardeners had never had great love for one another; over the centuries, they had fought border wars beyond count, and raided back and forth across mountains and marches even when at peace.

The enmity had waned a bit after Dorne had become part of the Seven Kingdoms . . . until the Dornish prince they called the Red Viper had crippled the young heir of Highgarden in a tourney. *This could be ticklish*, the dwarf thought, waiting to see how his father would handle it.

“Prince Doran comes at my son’s invitation,” Lord Tywin said calmly, “not only to join in our celebration, but to claim his seat on this council, and the justice Robert denied him for the murder of his sister Elia and her children.”

Tyrion watched the faces of the Lords Tyrell, Redwyne, and Rowan, wondering if any of the three would be bold enough to say, “But Lord Tywin, wasn’t it *you* who presented the bodies to Robert, all wrapped up in Lannister cloaks?” None of them did, but it was there on their faces all the same. *Redwyne does not give a fig*, he thought, *but Rowan looks fit to gag*.

“When the king is wed to your Margaery and Myrcella to Prince Trystane, we shall all be one great House,” Ser Kevan reminded Mace Tyrell. “The enmities of the past should remain there, would you not agree, my lord?”

“This is *my daughter’s wedding*—”

“—and my grandson’s,” said Lord Tywin firmly. “No place for old quarrels, surely?”

“I have no quarrel with *Doran* Martell,” insisted Lord Tyrell, though his tone was more than a little grudging. “If he wishes to cross the Reach in peace, he need only ask my leave.”

Small chance of that, thought Tyrion. *He’ll climb the Boneway, turn east near Summerhall, and come up the kingsroad*.

“Three hundred Dornishmen need not trouble our plans,” said Cersei. “We can feed the men-at-arms in the yard, squeeze some extra benches into the throne room for the lordlings and highborn knights, and find Prince Doran a place of honor on the dais.”

Not by me, was the message Tyrion saw in Mace Tyrell’s eyes, but the Lord of Highgarden made no reply but a curt nod.

“Perhaps we can move to a more pleasant task,” said Lord Tywin. “The fruits of victory await division.”

“What could be sweeter?” said Littlefinger, who had already swallowed his own fruit, Harrenhal.

Each lord had his own demands; this castle and that village, tracts of lands, a small river, a forest, the wardship of certain minors left fatherless by the battle. Fortunately, these fruits were plentiful, and there were orphans and castles for all. Varys had lists. Forty-seven lesser lordlings and six hundred nineteen knights had lost their lives beneath the fiery heart of Stannis and his Lord of Light, along with several thousand common men-at-arms. Traitors all, their heirs were disinherited, their lands and castles granted to those who had proved more loyal.

Highgarden reaped the richest harvest. Tyrion eyed Mace Tyrell’s broad belly and thought, *He has a prodigious appetite, this one*. Tyrell demanded the lands and castles of Lord Alester Florent, his own bannerman, who’d had the singular ill judgment to back first Renly and then Stannis. Lord Tywin was pleased to oblige. Brightwater Keep and all its lands and incomes were granted to Lord Tyrell’s second son, Ser Garlan, transforming him into a great lord in the blink of an eye. His elder brother, of course, stood to inherit Highgarden itself.

Lesser tracts were granted to Lord Rowan, and set aside for Lord Tarly, Lady Oakheart, Lord Hightower, and other worthies not present. Lord Redwyne asked only for thirty years’ remission of the taxes that Littlefinger and his wine factors had levied on certain of the Arbor’s finest vintages. When that was granted, he pronounced himself well satisfied and suggested that they send for a cask of Arbor gold, to toast good King Joffrey and his wise and benevolent Hand. At that Cersei lost patience. “It’s swords Joff needs, not toasts,” she snapped. “His realm is still plagued with would-be usurpers and self-styled kings.”

“But not for long, I think,” said Varys unctuously.

“A few more items remain, my lords.” Ser Kevan consulted his papers. “Ser Addam has found some crystals from the High Septon’s crown. It appears certain now that the thieves broke up the crystals and melted down the gold.”

“Our Father Above knows their guilt and will sit in judgment on them all,” the High Septon said piously.

“No doubt he will,” said Lord Tywin. “All the same, you must be crowned at the king’s wedding. Cersei, summon your goldsmiths, we must see to a replacement.” He did not wait for her reply, but turned at once to Varys. “You have reports?”

The eunuch drew a parchment from his sleeve. “A kraken has been seen off the Fingers.” He giggled. “Not a *Greyjoy*, mind you, a true kraken. It attacked an Ibbenese whaler and pulled it under. There is fighting on the Stepstones, and a new war between Tyrosh and Lys seems likely. Both hope to win Myr as ally. Sailors back from the Jade Sea report that a three-headed dragon has hatched in Qarth, and is the wonder of that city—”

“Dragons and krakens do not interest me, regardless of the number of their heads,” said Lord Tywin. “Have your whisperers perchance found some trace of my brother’s son?”

“Alas, our beloved Tyrek has quite vanished, the poor brave lad.” Varys sounded close to tears.

“Tywin,” Ser Kevan said, before Lord Tywin could vent his obvious displeasure, “some of the gold cloaks who deserted during the battle have drifted back to barracks, thinking to take up duty once again. Ser Addam wishes to know what to do with them.”

“They might have endangered Joff with their cowardice,” Cersei said at once. “I want them put to death.”

Varys sighed. “They have surely earned death, Your Grace, none can deny it. And yet, perhaps we might be wiser to send them to the Night’s Watch. We have had disturbing messages from the Wall of late. Of wildlings astir . . .”

“Wildlings, krakens, and dragons.” Mace Tyrell chuckled. “Why, is there anyone *not* stirring?”

Lord Tywin ignored that. “The deserters serve us best as a lesson. Break their knees with hammers. They will not run again. Nor will any man who sees them begging in the streets.” He glanced down the table to see if any of the other lords disagreed.

Tyrion remembered his own visit to the Wall, and the crabs he’d shared with old Lord Mormont and his officers. He remembered the Old Bear’s

fears as well. “Perhaps we might break the knees of a few to make our point. Those who killed Ser Jacelyn, say. The rest we can send to Marsh. The Watch is grievously under strength. If the Wall should fail . . .”

“. . . the wildlings will flood the north,” his father finished, “and the Starks and Greyjoys will have another enemy to contend with. They no longer wish to be subject to the Iron Throne, it would seem, so by what right do they look to the Iron Throne for aid? King Robb and King Balon both claim the north. Let *them* defend it, if they can. And if not, this Mance Rayder might even prove a useful ally.” Lord Tywin looked to his brother. “Is there more?”

Ser Kevan shook his head. “We are done. My lords, His Grace King Joffrey would no doubt wish to thank you all for your wisdom and good counsel.”

“I should like private words with my children,” said Lord Tywin as the others rose to leave. “You as well, Kevan.”

Obediently, the other councillors made their farewells, Varys the first to depart and Tyrell and Redwyne the last. When the chamber was empty but for the four Lannisters, Ser Kevan closed the door.

“*Master of coin?*” said Tyrion in a thin strained voice. “Whose notion was that, pray?”

“Lord Petyr’s,” his father said, “but it serves us well to have the treasury in the hands of a Lannister. You have asked for important work. Do you fear you might be incapable of the task?”

“No,” said Tyrion, “I fear a trap. Littlefinger is subtle and ambitious. I do not trust him. Nor should you.”

“He won Highgarden to our side . . .” Cersei began.

“. . . and sold you Ned Stark, I know. He will sell us just as quick. A coin is as dangerous as a sword in the wrong hands.”

His uncle Kevan looked at him oddly. “Not to us, surely. The gold of Casterly Rock . . .”

“. . . is dug from the ground. Littlefinger’s gold is made from thin air, with a snap of his fingers.”

“A more useful skill than any of yours, sweet brother,” purred Cersei, in a voice sweet with malice.

“Littlefinger is a liar—”

“—and black as well, said the raven of the crow.”

Lord Tywin slammed his hand down on the table. “*Enough!* I will have no more of this unseemly squabbling. You are both Lannisters, and will comport yourselves as such.”

Ser Kevan cleared his throat. “I would sooner have Petyr Baelish ruling the Eyrie than any of Lady Lysa’s other suitors. Yohn Royce, Lyn Corbray, Horton Redfort . . . these are dangerous men, each in his own way. And proud. Littlefinger may be clever, but he has neither high birth nor skill at arms. The lords of the Vale will never accept such as their liege.” He looked to his brother. When Lord Tywin nodded, he continued. “And there is this—Lord Petyr continues to demonstrate his loyalty. Only yesterday he brought us word of a Tyrell plot to spirit Sansa Stark off to Highgarden for a ‘visit,’ and there marry her to Lord Mace’s eldest son, Willas.”

“*Littlefinger* brought you word?” Tyrion leaned against the table. “Not our master of whisperers? How interesting.”

Cersei looked at their uncle in disbelief. “Sansa is my hostage. She goes *nowhere* without my leave.”

“Leave you must perforce grant, should Lord Tyrell ask,” their father pointed out. “To refuse him would be tantamount to declaring that we did not trust him. He would take offense.”

“Let him. What do we care?”

Bloody fool, thought Tyrion. “Sweet sister,” he explained patiently, “offend Tyrell and you offend Redwyne, Tarly, Rowan, and Hightower as well, and perhaps start them wondering whether Robb Stark might not be more accommodating of their desires.”

“I will not have the rose and the direwolf in bed together,” declared Lord Tywin. “We must forestall him.”

“How?” asked Cersei.

“By marriage. Yours, to begin with.”

It came so suddenly that Cersei could only stare for a moment. Then her cheeks reddened as if she had been slapped. “No. Not again. I will not.”

“Your Grace,” said Ser Kevan, courteously, “you are a young woman, still fair and fertile. Surely you cannot wish to spend the rest of your days alone? And a new marriage would put to rest this talk of incest for good and all.”

“So long as you remain unwed, you allow Stannis to spread his disgusting slander,” Lord Tywin told his daughter. “You must have a new husband in your bed, to father children on you.”

“Three children is quite sufficient. I am Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, not a brood mare! The Queen *Regent*!”

“You are my daughter, and will do as I command.”

She stood. “I will not sit here and listen to this—”

“You will if you wish to have any voice in the choice of your next husband,” Lord Tywin said calmly.

When she hesitated, then sat, Tyrion knew she was lost, despite her loud declaration of, “I will *not* marry again!”

“You will marry and you will breed. Every child you birth makes Stannis more a liar.” Their father’s eyes seemed to pin her to her chair. “Mace Tyrell, Paxter Redwyne, and Doran Martell are wed to younger women likely to outlive them. Balon Greyjoy’s wife is elderly and failing, but such a match would commit us to an alliance with the Iron Islands, and I am still uncertain whether that would be our wisest course.”

“No,” Cersei said from between white lips. “No, no, no.”

Tyrion could not quite suppress the grin that came to his lips at the thought of packing his sister off to Pyke. *Just when I was about to give up praying, some sweet god gives me this.*

Lord Tywin went on. “Oberyn Martell might suit, but the Tyrells would take that very ill. So we must look to the sons. I assume you do not object to wedding a man younger than yourself?”

“I object to wedding *any*—”

“I have considered the Redwyne twins, Theon Greyjoy, Quentyn Martell, and a number of others. But our alliance with Highgarden was the sword that broke Stannis. It should be tempered and made stronger. Ser Loras has taken the white and Ser Garlan is wed to one of the Fossoways, but there remains the eldest son, the boy they scheme to wed to Sansa Stark.”

Willas Tyrell. Tyrion was taking a wicked pleasure in Cersei’s helpless fury. “That would be the cripple,” he said.

Their father chilled him with a look. “Willas is heir to Highgarden, and by all reports a mild and courtly young man, fond of reading books and looking at the stars. He has a passion for breeding animals as well, and owns the finest hounds, hawks, and horses in the Seven Kingdoms.”

A perfect match, mused Tyrion. *Cersei also has a passion for breeding.* He pitied poor Willas Tyrell, and did not know whether he wanted to laugh at his sister or weep for her.

“The Tyrell heir would be my choice,” Lord Tywin concluded, “but if you would prefer another, I will hear your reasons.”

“That is so very kind of you, Father,” Cersei said with icy courtesy. “It is such a difficult choice you give me. Who would I sooner take to bed, the old squid or the crippled dog boy? I shall need a few days to consider. Do I have your leave to go?”

You are the queen, Tyrion wanted to tell her. *He ought to be begging leave of you.*

“Go,” their father said. “We shall talk again after you have composed yourself. Remember your duty.”

Cersei swept stiffly from the room, her rage plain to see. *Yet in the end she will do as Father bid.* She had proved that with Robert. *Though there is Jaime to consider.* Their brother had been much younger when Cersei wed the first time; he might not acquiesce to a second marriage quite so easily. The unfortunate Willas Tyrell was like to contract a sudden fatal case of sword-through-bowels, which could rather sour the alliance between Highgarden and Casterly Rock. *I should say something, but what? Pardon me, Father, but it’s our brother she wants to marry?*

“Tyrion.”

He gave a resigned smile. “Do I hear the herald summoning me to the lists?”

“Your whoring is a weakness in you,” Lord Tywin said without preamble, “but perhaps some share of the blame is mine. Since you stand no taller than a boy, I have found it easy to forget that you are in truth a man grown, with all of a man’s baser needs. It is past time you were wed.”

I was wed, or have you forgotten? Tyrion’s mouth twisted, and the noise emerged that was half laugh and half snarl.

“Does the prospect of marriage amuse you?”

“Only imagining what a bugger-all handsome bridegroom I’ll make.” A wife might be the very thing he needed. If she brought him lands and a keep, it would give him a place in the world apart from Joffrey’s court . . . and away from Cersei and their father.

On the other hand, there was Shae. *She will not like this, for all she swears that she is content to be my whore.*

That was scarcely a point to sway his father, however, so Tyrion squirmed higher in his seat and said, “You mean to wed me to Sansa Stark. But won’t the Tyrells take the match as an affront, if they have designs on the girl?”

“Lord Tyrell will not broach the matter of the Stark girl until after Joffrey’s wedding. If Sansa is wed before that, how can he take offense, when he gave us no hint of his intentions?”

“Quite so,” said Ser Kevan, “and any lingering resentments should be soothed by the offer of Cersei for his Willas.”

Tyrion rubbed at the raw stub of his nose. The scar tissue itched abominably sometimes. “His Grace the royal pustule has made Sansa’s life a misery since the day her father died, and now that she is finally rid of Joffrey you propose to marry her to me. That seems singularly cruel. Even for you, Father.”

“Why, do you plan to mistreat her?” His father sounded more curious than concerned. “The girl’s happiness is not my purpose, nor should it be yours. Our alliances in the south may be as solid as Casterly Rock, but there remains the north to win, and the key to the north is Sansa Stark.”

“She is no more than a child.”

“Your sister swears she’s flowered. If so, she is a woman, fit to be wed. You must needs take her maidenhead, so no man can say the marriage was not consummated. After that, if you prefer to wait a year or two before bedding her again, you would be within your rights as her husband.”

Shae is all the woman I need just now, he thought, *and Sansa’s a girl, no matter what you say*. “If your purpose here is to keep her from the Tyrells, why not return her to her mother? Perhaps that would convince Robb Stark to bend the knee.”

Lord Tywin’s look was scornful. “Send her to Riverrun and her mother will match her with a Blackwood or a Mallister to shore up her son’s alliances along the Trident. Send her north, and she will be wed to some Manderly or Umber before the moon turns. Yet she is no less dangerous here at court, as this business with the Tyrells should prove. She must marry a Lannister, and soon.”

“The man who weds Sansa Stark can claim Winterfell in her name,” his uncle Kevan put in. “Had that not occurred to you?”

“If you will not have the girl, we shall give her to one of your cousins,” said his father. “Kevan, is Lancel strong enough to wed, do you think?”

Ser Kevan hesitated. “If we bring the girl to his bedside, he could say the words . . . but to consummate, no . . . I would suggest one of the twins, but the Starks hold them both at Riverrun. They have Genna’s boy Tion as well, else he might serve.”

Tyrion let them have their byplay; it was all for his benefit, he knew. *Sansa Stark*, he mused. Soft-spoken sweet-smelling Sansa, who loved silks, songs, chivalry and tall gallant knights with handsome faces. He felt as though he was back on the bridge of boats, the deck shifting beneath his feet.

“You asked me to reward you for your efforts in the battle,” Lord Tywin reminded him forcefully. “This is a chance for you, Tyrion, the best you are ever likely to have.” He drummed his fingers impatiently on the table. “I once hoped to marry your brother to Lysa Tully, but Aerys named Jaime to his Kingsguard before the arrangements were complete. When I suggested

to Lord Hoster that Lysa might be wed to you instead, he replied that he wanted a whole man for his daughter.”

So he wed her to Jon Arryn, who was old enough to be her grandfather. Tyrion was more inclined to be thankful than angry, considering what Lysa Arryn had become.

“When I offered you to Dorne I was told that the suggestion was an insult,” Lord Tywin continued. “In later years I had similar answers from Yohn Royce and Leyton Hightower. I finally stooped so low as to suggest you might take the Florent girl Robert deflowered in his brother’s wedding bed, but her father preferred to give her to one of his own household knights.

“If you will not have the Stark girl, I shall find you another wife. Somewhere in the realm there is doubtless some little lordling who’d gladly part with a daughter to win the friendship of Casterly Rock. Lady Tanda has offered Lollys . . .”

Tyrion gave a shudder of dismay. “I’d sooner cut it off and feed it to the goats.”

“Then open your eyes. The Stark girl is young, nubile, tractable, of the highest birth, and still a maid. She is not uncomely. Why would you hesitate?”

Why indeed? “A quirk of mine. Strange to say, I would prefer a wife who wants me in her bed.”

“If you think your whores want you in their bed, you are an even greater fool than I suspected,” said Lord Tywin. “You disappoint me, Tyrion. I had hoped this match would please you.”

“Yes, we all know how important my pleasure is to you, Father. But there’s more to this. The key to the north, you say? The Greyjoys hold the north now, and King Balon has a daughter. Why Sansa Stark, and not her?” He looked into his father’s cool green eyes with their bright flecks of gold.

Lord Tywin steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “Balon Greyjoy thinks in terms of plunder, not rule. Let him enjoy an autumn crown and suffer a northern winter. He will give his subjects no cause to love him. Come spring, the northmen will have had a bellyful of krakens. When you bring

Eddard Stark's grandson home to claim his birthright, lords and little folk alike will rise as one to place him on the high seat of his ancestors. You *are* capable of getting a woman with child, I hope?"

"I believe I am," he said, bristling. "I confess, I cannot prove it. Though no one can say I have not tried. Why, I plant my little seeds just as often as I can . . ."

"In the gutters and the ditches," finished Lord Tywin, "and in common ground where only bastard weeds take root. It is past time you kept your own garden." He rose to his feet. "You shall never have Casterly Rock, I promise you. But wed Sansa Stark, and it is just possible that you might win Winterfell."

Tyrion Lannister, Lord Protector of Winterfell. The prospect gave him a queer chill. "Very good, Father," he said slowly, "but there's a big ugly roach in your rushes. Robb Stark is as *capable* as I am, presumably, and sworn to marry one of those fertile Freys. And once the Young Wolf sires a litter, any pups that Sansa births are heirs to nothing."

Lord Tywin was unconcerned. "Robb Stark will father no children on his fertile Frey, you have my word. There is a bit of news I have not yet seen fit to share with the council, though no doubt the good lords will hear it soon enough. The Young Wolf has taken Gawen Westerling's eldest daughter to wife."

For a moment Tyrion could not believe he'd heard his father right. "He broke his sworn word?" he said, incredulous. "He threw away the Freys for . . ." Words failed him.

"A maid of sixteen years, named Jeyne," said Ser Kevan. "Lord Gawen once suggested her to me for Willem or Martyn, but I had to refuse him. Gawen is a good man, but his wife is Sybell Spicer. He should never have wed her. The Westerlings always did have more honor than sense. Lady Sybell's grandfather was a trader in saffron and pepper, almost as lowborn as that smuggler Stannis keeps. And the grandmother was some woman he'd brought back from the east. A frightening old crone, supposed to be a priestess. *Maegi*, they called her. No one could pronounce her real name. Half of Lannisport used to go to her for cures and love potions and the like." He shrugged. "She's long dead, to be sure. And Jeyne seemed a sweet

child, I'll grant you, though I only saw her once. But with such doubtful blood . . .”

Having once married a whore, Tyrion could not entirely share his uncle's horror at the thought of wedding a girl whose great grandfather sold cloves. Even so . . . *A sweet child*, Ser Kevan had said, but many a poison was sweet as well. The Westerlings were old blood, but they had more pride than power. It would not surprise him to learn that Lady Sybell had brought more wealth to the marriage than her highborn husband. The Westerling mines had failed years ago, their best lands had been sold off or lost, and the Crag was more ruin than stronghold. *A romantic ruin, though, jutting up so brave above the sea*. “I am surprised,” Tyrion had to confess. “I thought Robb Stark had better sense.”

“He is a boy of sixteen,” said Lord Tywin. “At that age, sense weighs for little, against lust and love and honor.”

“He forswore himself, shamed an ally, betrayed a solemn promise. Where is the honor in that?”

Ser Kevan answered. “He chose the girl's honor over his own. Once he had deflowered her, he had no other course.”

“It would have been kinder to leave her with a bastard in her belly,” said Tyrion bluntly. The Westerlings stood to lose everything here; their lands, their castle, their very lives. *A Lannister always pays his debts*.

“Jeyne Westerling is her mother's daughter,” said Lord Tywin, “and Robb Stark is his father's son.”

This Westerling betrayal did not seem to have enraged his father as much as Tyrion would have expected. Lord Tywin did not suffer disloyalty in his vassals. He had extinguished the proud Reynes of Castamere and the ancient Tarbecks of Tarbeck Hall root and branch when he was still half a boy. The singers had even made a rather gloomy song of it. Some years later, when Lord Farman of Faircastle grew truculent, Lord Tywin sent an envoy bearing a lute instead of a letter. But once he'd heard “The Rains of Castamere” echoing through his hall, Lord Farman gave no further trouble. And if the song were not enough, the shattered castles of the Reynes and Tarbecks still stood as mute testimony to the fate that awaited those who chose to scorn the power of Casterly Rock. “The Crag is not so far from

Tarbeck Hall and Castamere,” Tyrion pointed out. “You’d think the Westerlings might have ridden past and seen the lesson there.”

“Mayhaps they have,” Lord Tywin said. “They are well aware of Castamere, I promise you.”

“Could the Westerlings and Spicers be such great fools as to believe the wolf can defeat the lion?”

Every once in a very long while, Lord Tywin Lannister would actually threaten to smile; he never did, but the threat alone was terrible to behold. “The greatest fools are oftentimes more clever than the men who laugh at them,” he said, and then, “You will marry Sansa Stark, Tyrion. And soon.”