

TYRION

“You want eat?” Mord asked, glowering. He had a plate of oiled beans in one thick, stub-fingered hand.

Tyrion Lannister was starved, but he refused to let this brute see him cringe. “A leg of lamb would be pleasant,” he said, from the heap of soiled straw in the corner of his cell. “Perhaps a dish of peas and onions, some fresh baked bread with butter, and a flagon of mulled wine to wash it down. Or beer, if that’s easier. I try not to be overly particular.”

“Is beans,” Mord said. “Here.” He held out the plate.

Tyrion sighed. The turnkey was twenty stone of gross stupidity, with brown rotting teeth and small dark eyes. The left side of his face was slick with scar where an axe had cut off his ear and part of his cheek. He was as predictable as he was ugly, but Tyrion *was* hungry. He reached up for the plate.

Mord jerked it away, grinning. “Is here,” he said, holding it out beyond Tyrion’s reach.

The dwarf climbed stiffly to his feet, every joint aching. “Must we play the same fool’s game with every meal?” He made another grab for the beans.

Mord shambled backward, grinning through his rotten teeth. “Is here, dwarf man.” He held the plate out at arm’s length, over the edge where the cell ended and the sky began. “You not want eat? Here. Come take.”

Tyrion’s arms were too short to reach the plate, and he was not about to step that close to the edge. All it would take would be a quick shove of Mord’s heavy white belly, and he would end up a sickening red splotch on the stones of Sky, like so many other prisoners of the Eyrie over the centuries. “Come to think on it, I’m not hungry after all,” he declared, retreating to the corner of his cell.

Mord grunted and opened his thick fingers. The wind took the plate, flipping it over as it fell. A handful of beans sprayed back at them as the

food tumbled out of sight. The turnkey laughed, his gut shaking like a bowl of pudding.

Tyrion felt a pang of rage. “You fucking son of a pox-ridden ass,” he spat. “I hope you die of a bloody flux.”

For that, Mord gave him a kick, driving a steel-toed boot hard into Tyrion’s ribs on the way out. “I take it back!” he gasped as he doubled over on the straw. “I’ll kill you myself, I swear it!” The heavy iron-bound door slammed shut. Tyrion heard the rattle of keys.

For a small man, he had been cursed with a dangerously big mouth, he reflected as he crawled back to his corner of what the Arryns laughably called their dungeon. He huddled beneath the thin blanket that was his only bedding, staring out at a blaze of empty blue sky and distant mountains that seemed to go on forever, wishing he still had the shadowskin cloak he’d won from Marillion at dice, after the singer had stolen it off the body of that brigand chief. The skin had smelled of blood and mold, but it was warm and thick. Mord had taken it the moment he laid eyes on it.

The wind tugged at his blanket with gusts sharp as talons. His cell was miserably small, even for a dwarf. Not five feet away, where a wall ought to have been, where a wall *would* be in a proper dungeon, the floor ended and the sky began. He had plenty of fresh air and sunshine, and the moon and stars by night, but Tyrion would have traded it all in an instant for the dankest, gloomiest pit in the bowels of the Casterly Rock.

“You fly,” Mord had promised him, when he’d shoved him into the cell. “Twenty day, thirty, fifty maybe. Then you fly.”

The Arryns kept the only dungeon in the realm where the prisoners were welcome to escape at will. That first day, after girding up his courage for hours, Tyrion had lain flat on his stomach and squirmed to the edge, to poke out his head and look down. Sky was six hundred feet below, with nothing between but empty air. If he craned his neck out as far as it could go, he could see other cells to his right and left and above him. He was a bee in a stone honeycomb, and someone had torn off his wings.

It was cold in the cell, the wind screamed night and day, and worst of all, the floor *sloped*. Ever so slightly, yet it was enough. He was afraid to

close his eyes, afraid that he might roll over in his sleep and wake in sudden terror as he went sliding off the edge. Small wonder the sky cells drove men mad.

Gods save me, some previous tenant had written on the wall in something that looked suspiciously like blood, *the blue is calling*. At first Tyrion wondered who he'd been, and what had become of him; later, he decided that he would rather not know.

If only he had shut his mouth...

The wretched boy had started it, looking down on him from a throne of carved weirwood beneath the moon-and-falcon banners of House Arryn. Tyrion Lannister had been looked down on all his life, but seldom by rheumy-eyed six-year-olds who needed to stuff fat cushions under their cheeks to lift them to the height of a man. "Is he the bad man?" the boy had asked, clutching his doll.

"He is," the Lady Lysa had said from the lesser throne beside him. She was all in blue, powdered and perfumed for the suitors who filled her court.

"He's so *small*," the Lord of the Eyrie said, giggling.

"This is Tyrion the Imp, of House Lannister, who murdered your father." She raised her voice so it carried down the length of High Hall of the Eyrie, ringing off the milk-white walls and the slender pillars, so every man could hear it. "*He slew the Hand of the King!*"

"Oh, did I kill him too?" Tyrion had said, like a fool.

That would have been a very good time to have kept his mouth closed and his head bowed. He could see that now; seven hells, he had seen it then. The High Hall of the Arryns was long and austere, with a forbidding coldness to its walls of blue-veined white marble, but the faces around him had been colder by far. The power of Casterly Rock was far away, and there were no friends of the Lannisters in the Vale of Arryn. Submission and silence would have been his best defenses.

But Tyrion's mood had been too foul for sense. To his shame, he had faltered during the last leg of their day-long climb up to the Eyrie, his stunted legs unable to take him any higher. Bronn had carried him the rest

of the way, and the humiliation poured oil on the flames of his anger. “It would seem I’ve been a busy little fellow,” he said with bitter sarcasm. “I wonder when I found the time to do all this slaying and murdering.”

He ought to have remembered who he was dealing with. Lysa Arryn and her half-sane weakling son had not been known at court for their love of wit, especially when it was directed at them.

“Imp,” Lysa said coldly, “you will guard that mocking tongue of yours and speak to my son politely, or I promise you will have cause to regret it. Remember where you are. This is the Eyrie, and these are knights of the Vale you see around you, true men who loved Jon Arryn well. Every one of them would die for me.”

“Lady Arryn, should any harm come to me, my brother Jaime will be pleased to see that they do.” Even as he spat out the words, Tyrion knew they were folly.

“Can you fly, my lord of Lannister?” Lady Lysa asked. “Does a dwarf have wings? If not, you would be wiser to swallow the next threat that comes to mind.”

“I made no threats,” Tyrion said. “That was a promise.”

Little Lord Robert hopped to his feet at that, so upset he dropped his doll. “You can’t hurt us,” he screamed. “No one can hurt us here. Tell him, Mother, tell him he can’t hurt us here.” The boy began to twitch.

“The Eyrie is impregnable,” Lysa Arryn declared calmly. She drew her son close, holding him safe in the circle of her plump white arms. “The Imp is trying to frighten us, sweet baby. The Lannisters are all liars. No one will hurt my sweet boy.”

The hell of it was, she was no doubt right. Having seen what it took to get here, Tyrion could well imagine how it would be for a knight trying to fight his way up in armor, while stones and arrows poured down from above and enemies contested with him for every step. *Nightmare* did not begin to describe it. Small wonder the Eyrie had never been taken.

Still, Tyrion had been unable to silence himself. “Not impregnable,” he said, “merely inconvenient.”

Young Robert pointed down, his hand trembling. “You’re a *liar*. Mother, I want to see him fly.” Two guardsmen in sky-blue cloaks seized Tyrion by the arms, lifting him off his floor.

The gods only know what might have happened then were it not for Catelyn Stark. “Sister,” she called out from where she stood below the thrones, “I beg you to remember, this man is *my* prisoner. I will not have him harmed.”

Lysa Arryn glanced at her sister coolly for a moment, then rose and swept down on Tyrion, her long skirts trailing after her. For an instant he feared she would strike him, but instead she commanded them to release him. Her men shoved him to the floor, his legs went out from under him, and Tyrion fell.

He must have made quite a sight as he struggled to his knees, only to feel his right leg spasm, sending him sprawling once more. Laughter boomed up and down the High Hall of the Arryns.

“My sister’s little guest is too weary to stand,” Lady Lysa announced. “Ser Vardis, take him down to the dungeon. A rest in one of our sky cells will do him much good.”

The guardsmen jerked him upright. Tyrion Lannister dangled between them, kicking feebly, his face red with shame. “I will remember this,” he told them all as they carried him off.

And so he did, for all the good it did him.

At first he had consoled himself that this imprisonment could not last long. Lysa Arryn wanted to humble him, that was all. She would send for him again, and soon. If not her, then Catelyn Stark would want to question him. This time he would guard his tongue more closely. They dare not kill him out of hand; he was still a Lannister of Casterly Rock, and if they shed his blood, it would mean war. Or so he had told himself.

Now he was not so certain.

Perhaps his captors only meant to let him rot here, but he feared he did not have the strength to rot for long. He was growing weaker every day, and it was only a matter of time until Mord’s kicks and blows did him serious

harm, provided the gaoler did not starve him to death first. A few more nights of cold and hunger, and the blue would start calling to him too.

He wondered what was happening beyond the walls (such as they were) of his cell. Lord Tywin would surely have sent out riders when the word reached him. Jaime might be leading a host through the Mountains of the Moon even now... unless he was riding north against Winterfell instead. Did anyone outside the Vale even suspect where Catelyn Stark had taken him? He wondered what Cersei would do when she heard. The king could order him freed, but would Robert listen to his queen or his Hand? Tyrion had no illusions about the king's love for his sister.

If Cersei kept her wits about her, she would insist the king sit in judgment of Tyrion himself. Even Ned Stark could scarcely object to that, not without impugning the honor of the king. And Tyrion would be only too glad to take his chances in a trial. Whatever murders they might lay at his door, the Starks had no proof of anything so far as he could see. Let them make their case before the Iron Throne and the lords of the land. It would be the end of them. If only Cersei were clever enough to see that...

Tyrion Lannister sighed. His sister was not without a certain low cunning, but her pride blinded her. She would see the insult in this, not the opportunity. And Jaime was even worse, rash and headstrong and quick to anger. His brother never untied a knot when he could slash it in two with his sword.

He wondered which of them had sent the footpad to silence the Stark boy, and whether they had truly conspired at the death of Lord Arryn. If the old Hand had been murdered, it was deftly and subtly done. Men of his age died of sudden illness all the time. In contrast, sending some oaf with a stolen knife after Brandon Stark struck him as unbelievably clumsy. And wasn't *that* peculiar, come to think on it...

Tyrion shivered. Now *there* was a nasty suspicion. Perhaps the direwolf and the lion were not the only beasts in the woods, and if that was true, someone was using him as a catspaw. Tyrion Lannister hated being used.

He would have to get out of here, and soon. His chances of overpowering Mord were small to none, and no one was about to smuggle

him a six-hundred-foot-long rope, so he would have to talk himself free. His mouth had gotten him into this cell; it could damn well get him out.

Tyrion pushed himself to his feet, doing his best to ignore the slope of the floor beneath him, with its ever-so-subtle tug toward the edge. He hammered on the door with a fist. “*Mord!*” he shouted. “*Turnkey! Mord, I want you!*” He had to keep it up a good ten minutes before he heard footsteps. Tyrion stepped back an instant before the door opened with a crash.

“Making noise,” Mord growled, with blood in his eyes. Dangling from one meaty hand was a leather strap, wide and thick, doubled over in his fist.

Never show them you’re afraid, Tyrion reminded himself. “How would you like to be rich?” he asked.

Mord hit him. He swung the strap backhand, lazily, but the leather caught Tyrion high on the arm. The force of it staggered him, and the pain made him grit his teeth. “No mouth, dwarf man,” Mord warned him.

“Gold,” Tyrion said, miming a smile. “Casterly Rock is full of gold... *ahhhh...*” This time the blow was a forehand, and Mord put more of his arm into the swing, making the leather crack and jump. It caught Tyrion in the ribs and dropped him to his knees, whimpering. He forced himself to look up at the gaoler. “As rich as the Lannisters,” he wheezed. “That’s what they say, Mord—”

Mord grunted. The strap whistled through the air and smashed Tyrion full in the face. The pain was so bad he did not remember falling, but when he opened his eyes again he was on the floor of his cell. His ear was ringing, and his mouth was full of blood. He groped for purchase, to push himself up, and his fingers brushed against... nothing. Tyrion snatched his hand back as fast as if it had been scalded, and tried his best to stop breathing. He had fallen right on the edge, inches from the blue.

“More to say?” Mord held the strap between his fists and gave it a sharp pull. The snap made Tyrion jump. The turnkey laughed.

He won’t push me over, Tyrion told himself desperately as he crawled away from the edge. *Catelyn Stark wants me alive, he doesn’t dare kill me.*

He wiped the blood off his lips with the back of his hand, grinned, and said, "That was a stiff one, Mord." The gaoler squinted at him, trying to decide if he was being mocked. "I could make good use of a strong man like you." The strap flew at him, but this time Tyrion was able to cringe away from it. He took a glancing blow to the shoulder, nothing more. "Gold," he repeated, scrambling backward like a crab, "more gold than you'll see here in a lifetime. Enough to buy land, women, horses... you could be a lord. Lord Mord." Tyrion hawked up a glob of blood and phlegm and spat it out into the sky.

"Is no gold," Mord said.

He's listening! Tyrion thought. "They relieved me of my purse when they captured me, but the gold is still mine. Catelyn Stark might take a man prisoner, but she'd never stoop to rob him. That wouldn't be honorable. Help me, and all the gold is yours." Mord's strap licked out, but it was a halfhearted, desultory swing, slow and contemptuous. Tyrion caught the leather in his hand and held it prisoned. "There will be no risk to you. All you need do is deliver a message."

The gaoler yanked his leather strap free of Tyrion's grasp. "Message," he said, as if he had never heard the word before. His frown made deep creases in his brow.

"You heard me, my lord. Only carry my word to your lady. Tell her..." *What? What would possibly make Lysa Anyn relent?* The inspiration came to Tyrion Lannister suddenly. "...tell her that I wish to confess my crimes."

Mord raised his arm and Tyrion braced himself for another blow, but the turnkey hesitated. Suspicion and greed warred in his eyes. He wanted that gold, yet he feared a trick; he had the look of a man who had often been tricked. "Is lie," he muttered darkly. "Dwarf man cheat me."

"I will put my promise in writing," Tyrion vowed.

Some illiterates held writing in disdain; others seemed to have a superstitious reverence for the written word, as if it were some sort of magic. Fortunately, Mord was one of the latter. The turnkey lowered the strap. "Writing down gold. Much gold."

“Oh, *much* gold,” Tyrion assured him. “The purse is just a taste, my friend. My brother wears armor of solid gold plate.” In truth, Jaime’s armor was gilded steel, but this oaf would never know the difference.

Mord fingered his strap thoughtfully, but in the end, he relented and went to fetch paper and ink. When the letter was written, the gaoler frowned at it suspiciously. “Now deliver my message,” Tyrion urged.

He was shivering in his sleep when they came for him, late that night. Mord opened the door but kept his silence. Ser Vardis Egen woke Tyrion with the point of his boot. “On your feet, Imp. My lady wants to see you.”

Tyrion rubbed the sleep from his eyes and put on a grimace he scarcely felt. “No doubt she does, but what makes you think I wish to see her?”

Ser Vardis frowned. Tyrion remembered him well from the years he had spent at King’s Landing as the captain of the Hand’s household guard. A square, plain face, silver hair, a heavy build, and no humor whatsoever. “Your wishes are not my concern. On your feet, or I’ll have you carried.”

Tyrion clambered awkwardly to his feet. “A cold night,” he said casually, “and the High Hall is so drafty. I don’t wish to catch a chill. Mord, if you would be so good, fetch my cloak.”

The gaoler squinted at him, face dull with suspicion.

“My *cloak*,” Tyrion repeated. “The shadowskin you took from me for safekeeping. You recall.”

“Get him the damnable cloak,” Ser Vardis said.

Mord did not dare grumble. He gave Tyrion a glare that promised future retribution, yet he went for the cloak. When he draped it around his prisoner’s neck, Tyrion smiled. “My thanks. I shall think of you whenever I wear it.” He flung the trailing end of the long fur over his right shoulder, and felt warm for the first time in days. “Lead on, Ser Vardis.”

The High Hall of the Arryns was aglow with the light of fifty torches, burning in the sconces along the walls. The Lady Lysa wore black silk, with the moon-and-falcon sewn on her breast in pearls. Since she did not look the sort to join the Night’s Watch, Tyrion could only imagine that she had decided mourning clothes were appropriate garb for a confession. Her long

auburn hair, woven into an elaborate braid, fell across her left shoulder. The taller throne beside her was empty; no doubt the little Lord of the Eyrie was off shaking in his sleep. Tyrion was thankful for that much, at least.

He bowed deeply and took a moment to glance around the hall. Lady Arryn had summoned her knights and retainers to hear his confession, as he had hoped. He saw Ser Brynden Tully's craggy face and Lord Nestor Royce's bluff one. Beside Nestor stood a younger man with fierce black side-whiskers who could only be his heir, Ser Albar. Most of the principal houses of the Vale were represented. Tyrion noted Ser Lyn Corbray, slender as a sword, Lord Hunter with his gouty legs, the widowed Lady Waynwood surrounded by her sons. Others sported sigils he did not know; broken lance, green viper, burning tower, winged chalice.

Among the lords of the Vale were several of his companions from the high road; Ser Rodrik Cassel, pale from half-healed wounds, stood with Ser Willis Wode beside him. Marillion the singer had found a new woodharp. Tyrion smiled; whatever happened here tonight, he did not wish it to happen in secret, and there was no one like a singer for spreading a story near and far.

In the rear of the hall, Bronn lounged beneath a pillar. The freerider's black eyes were fixed on Tyrion, and his hand lay lightly on the pommel of his sword. Tyrion gave him a long look, wondering...

Catelyn Stark spoke first. "You wish to confess your crimes, we are told."

"I do, my lady," Tyrion answered.

Lysa Arryn smiled at her sister. "The sky cells always break them. The gods can see them there, and there is no darkness to hide in."

"He does not look broken to me," Lady Catelyn said.

Lady Lysa paid her no mind. "Say what you will," she commanded Tyrion.

And now to roll the dice, he thought with another quick glance back at Bronn. "Where to begin? I am a vile little man, I confess it. My crimes and sins are beyond counting, my lords and ladies. I have lain with whores, not

once but hundreds of times. I have wished my own lord father dead, and my sister, our gracious queen, as well.” Behind him, someone chuckled. “I have not always treated my servants with kindness. I have gambled. I have even cheated, I blush to admit. I have said many cruel and malicious things about the noble lords and ladies of the court.” That drew outright laughter. “Once I—”

“*Silence!*” Lysa Arryn’s pale round face had turned a burning pink. “What do you imagine you are doing, dwarf?”

Tyrion cocked his head to one side. “Why, confessing my crimes, my lady—”

Catelyn Stark took a step forward. “You are accused of sending a hired knife to slay my son Bran in his bed, and of conspiring to murder Lord Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King.”

Tyrion gave a helpless shrug. “*Those* crimes I cannot confess, I fear. I know nothing of any murders.”

Lady Lysa rose from her weirwood throne. “I will not be made mock of. You have had your little jape, Imp. I trust you enjoyed it. Ser Vardis, take him back to the dungeon... but this time find him a smaller cell, with a floor more sharply sloped.”

“Is *this* how justice is done in the Vale?” Tyrion roared, so loudly that Ser Vardis froze for an instant. “Does honor stop at the Bloody Gate? You accuse me of crimes, I deny them, so you throw me into an open cell to freeze and starve.” He lifted his head, to give them all a good look at the bruises Mord had left on his face. “Where is the king’s justice? Is the Eyrie not part of the Seven Kingdoms? I stand accused, you say. Very well. I *demand a trial!* Let me speak, and let my truth or falsehood be judged openly, in the sight of gods and men.”

A low murmuring filled the High Hall. He had her, Tyrion knew. He was highborn, the son of the most powerful lord in the realm, the brother of the queen. He could not be denied a trial. Guardsmen in sky-blue cloaks had started toward Tyrion, but Ser Vardis bid them halt and looked to Lady Lysa.

Her small mouth twitched in a petulant smile. “If you are tried and found to be guilty of the crimes for which you stand accused, then by the king’s own laws, you must pay with your life’s blood. We keep no headsman in the Eyrie, my lord of Lannister. Open the Moon Door.”

The press of spectators parted. A narrow weirwood door stood between two slender marble pillars, a crescent moon carved in the white wood. Those standing closest edged backward as a pair of guardsmen marched through. One man removed the heavy bronze bars; the second pulled the door inward. Their blue cloaks rose snapping from their shoulders, caught in the sudden gust of wind that came howling through the open door. Beyond was the emptiness of the night sky, speckled with cold uncaring stars.

“Behold the king’s justice,” Lysa Arryn said. Torch flames fluttered like pennons along the walls, and here and there the odd torch guttered out.

“Lysa, I think this unwise,” Catelyn Stark said as the black wind swirled around the hall.

Her sister ignored her. “You want a trial, my lord of Lannister. Very well, a trial you shall have. My son will listen to whatever you care to say, and you shall hear his judgment. Then you may leave... by one door or the other.”

She looked so pleased with herself, Tyrion thought, and small wonder. How could a trial threaten her, when her weakling son was the lord judge? Tyrion glanced at her Moon Door. *Mother, I want to see him fly!* the boy had said. How many men had the snot-nosed little wretch sent through that door already?

“I thank you, my good lady, but I see no need to trouble Lord Robert,” Tyrion said politely. “The gods know the truth of my innocence. I will have their verdict, not the judgment of men. I demand trial by combat.”

A storm of sudden laughter filled the High Hall of the Arryns. Lord Nestor Royce snorted, Ser Willis chuckled, Ser Lyn Corbray guffawed, and others threw back their heads and howled until tears ran down their faces. Marillion clumsily plucked a gay note on his new woodharp with the

fingers of his broken hand. Even the wind seemed to whistle with derision as it came skirling through the Moon Door.

Lysa Arryn's watery blue eyes looked uncertain. He had caught her off balance. "You have that right, to be sure."

The young knight with the green viper embroidered on his surcoat stepped forward and went to one knee. "My lady, I beg the boon of championing your cause."

"The honor should be mine," old Lord Hunter said. "For the love I bore your lord husband, let me avenge his death."

"My father served Lord Jon faithfully as High Steward of the Vale," Ser Albar Royce boomed. "Let me serve his son in this."

"The gods favor the man with the just cause," said Ser Lyn Corbray, "yet often that turns out to be the man with the surest sword. We all know who that is." He smiled modestly.

A dozen other men all spoke at once, clamoring to be heard. Tyrion found it disheartening to realize so many strangers were eager to kill him. Perhaps this had not been such a clever plan after all.

Lady Lysa raised a hand for silence. "I thank you, my lords, as I know my son would thank you if he were among us. No men in the Seven Kingdoms are as bold and true as the knights of the Vale. Would that I could grant you all this honor. Yet I can choose only one." She gestured. "Ser Vardis Egen, you were ever my lord husband's good right hand. You shall be our champion."

Ser Vardis had been singularly silent. "My lady," he said gravely, sinking to one knee, "pray give this burden to another, I have no taste for it. The man is no warrior. Look at him. A dwarf, half my size and lame in the legs. It would be shameful to slaughter such a man and call it justice."

Oh, *excellent*, Tyrion thought. "I agree."

Lysa glared at him. "You demanded a trial by combat."

"And now I demand a champion, such as you have chosen for yourself. My brother Jaime will gladly take my part, I know."

“Your precious Kingslayer is hundreds of leagues from here,” snapped Lysa Arryn.

“Send a bird for him. I will gladly await his arrival.”

“You will face Ser Vardis on the morrow.”

“Singer,” Tyrion said, turning to Marillion, “when you make a ballad of this, be certain you tell them how Lady Arryn denied the dwarf the right to a champion, and sent him forth lame and bruised and hobbling to face her finest knight.”

“I deny you *nothing*!” Lysa Arryn said, her voice peeved and shrill with irritation. “Name your champion, Imp... if you think you can find a man to die for you.”

“If it is all the same to you, I’d sooner find one to kill for me.” Tyrion looked over the long hall. No one moved. For a long moment he wondered if it had all been a colossal blunder.

Then there was a stirring in the rear of the chamber. “I’ll stand for the dwarf,” Bronn called out.