

## TYRION

The rushes were scratchy under the soles of his bare feet. “My cousin chooses a queer hour to come visiting,” Tyrion told a sleep-befuddled Podrick Payne, who’d doubtless expected to be well roasted for waking him. “See him to my solar and tell him I’ll be down shortly.”

It was well past midnight, he judged from the black outside the window. *Does Lancel think to find me drowsy and slow of wit at this hour?* he wondered. *No, Lancel scarce thinks at all, this is Cersei’s doing.* His sister would be disappointed. Even abed, he worked well into the morning—reading by the flickering light of a candle, scrutinizing the reports of Varys’s whisperers, and poring over Littlefinger’s books of accounts until the columns blurred and his eyes ached.

He splashed some tepid water on his face from the basin beside his bed and took his time squatting in the garderobe, the night air cold on his bare skin. Ser Lancel was sixteen, and not known for his patience. Let him wait, and grow more anxious in the waiting. When his bowels were empty, Tyrion slipped on a bedrobe and roughed his thin flaxen hair with his fingers, all the more to look as if he had wakened from sleep.

Lancel was pacing before the ashes of the hearth, garbed in slashed red velvet with black silk undersleeves, a jeweled dagger and a gilded scabbard hanging from his swordbelt. “Cousin,” Tyrion greeted him. “Your visits are too few. To what do I owe this undeserved pleasure?”

“Her Grace the Queen Regent has sent me to command you to release Grand Maester Pycelle.” Ser Lancel showed Tyrion a crimson ribbon, bearing Cersei’s lion seal impressed in golden wax. “Here is her warrant.”

“So it is.” Tyrion waved it away. “I hope my sister is not overtaxing her strength, so soon after her illness. It would be a great pity if she were to suffer a relapse.”

“Her Grace is quite recovered,” Ser Lancel said curtly.

“Music to my ears.” *Though not a tune I’m fond of. I should have given her a larger dose.* Tyrion had hoped for a few more days without Cersei’s interference, but he was not too terribly surprised by her return to health. She was Jaime’s twin, after all. He made himself smile pleasantly. “Pod, build us a fire, the air is too chilly for my taste. Will you take a cup with me, Lancel? I find that mulled wine helps me sleep.”

“I need no help sleeping,” Ser Lancel said. “I am come at Her Grace’s behest, not to drink with you, Imp.”

Knighthood had made the boy bolder, Tyrion reflected—that, and the sorry part he had played in murdering King Robert. “Wine does have its dangers.” He smiled as he poured. “As to Grand Maester Pycelle... if my sweet sister is so concerned for him, I would have thought she’d come herself. Instead she sends you. What am I to make of that?”

“Make of it what you will, so long as you release your prisoner. The Grand Maester is a staunch friend to the Queen Regent, and under her personal protection.” A hint of a sneer played about the lad’s lips; he was enjoying this. *He takes his lessons from Cersei.* “Her Grace will never consent to this outrage. She reminds you that she is Joffrey’s regent.”

“As I am Joffrey’s Hand.”

“The Hand serves,” the young knight informed him airily. “The regent *rules* until the king is of age.”

“Perhaps you ought write that down so I’ll remember it better.” The fire was crackling merrily. “You may leave us, Pod,” Tyrion told his squire. Only when the boy was gone did he turn back to Lancel. “There is more?”

“Yes. Her Grace bids me inform you that Ser Jacelyn Bywater defied a command issued in the king’s own name.”

*Which means that Cersei has already ordered Bywater to release Pycelle, and been rebuffed.* “I see.”

“She insists that the man be removed from his office and placed under arrest for treason. I warn you—”

He set aside his wine cup. “I’ll hear no warnings from you, boy.”

“*Ser*,” Lancel said stiffly. He touched his sword, perhaps to remind Tyrion that he wore one. “Have a care how you speak to me, Imp.” Doubtless he meant to sound threatening, but that absurd wisp of a mustache ruined the effect.

“Oh, unhand your sword. One cry from me and Shagga will burst in and kill you. With an axe, not a wineskin.”

Lancel reddened; was he such a fool as to believe his part in Robert’s death had gone unnoted? “I am a knight—”

“So I’ve noted. Tell me—did Cersei have you knighted before or after she took you into her bed?”

The flicker in Lancel’s green eyes was all the admission Tyrion needed. So Varys told it true. *Well, no one can ever claim that my sister does not love her family.* “What, nothing to say? No more warnings for me, ser?”

“You will withdraw these filthy accusations or—”

“Please. Have you given any thought to what Joffrey will do when I tell him you murdered his father to bed his mother?”

“It was not like that!” Lancel protested, horrified.

“No? What *was* it like, pray?”

“The queen gave me the strongwine! Your own father Lord Tywin, when I was named the king’s squire, he told me to obey her in everything.”

“Did he tell you to fuck her too?” *Look at him. Not quite so tall, his features not so fine, and his hair is sand instead of spun gold, yet still... even a poor copy of Jaime is sweeter than an empty bed, I suppose.* “No, I thought not.”

“I never meant... I only did as I was bid, I...”

“...hated every instant of it, is that what you would have me believe? A high place at court, knighthood, my sister’s legs opening for you at night, oh, yes, it must have been terrible for you.” Tyrion pushed himself to his feet. “Wait here. His Grace will want to hear this.”

The defiance went from Lancel all at once. The young knight fell to his knees a frightened boy. “Mercy, my lord, I beg you.”

“Save it for Joffrey. He likes a good beg.”

“My lord, it was your sister’s bidding, the queen, as you said, but His Grace... he’d never understand...”

“Would you have me keep the truth from the king?”

“For my father’s sake! I’ll leave the city, it will be as if it never happened! I swear, I will end it...”

It was hard not to laugh. “I think not.”

Now the lad looked lost. “My lord?”

“You heard me. My father told you to obey my sister? Very well, obey her. Stay close to her side, keep her trust, pleasure her as often as she requires it. No one need ever know... so long as you keep faith with me. I want to know what Cersei is doing. Where she goes, who she sees, what they talk of, what plans she is hatching. All. And you will be the one to tell me, won’t you?”

“Yes, my lord.” Lancel spoke without a moment’s hesitation. Tyrion liked that. “I will. I swear it. As you command.”

“Rise.” Tyrion filled the second cup and pressed it on him. “Drink to our understanding. I promise, there are no boars in the castle that I know of.” Lancel lifted the cup and drank, albeit stiffly. “Smile, cousin. My sister is a beautiful woman, and it’s all for the good of the realm. You could do well out of this. Knighthood is nothing. If you’re clever, you’ll have a lordship from me before you’re done.” Tyrion swirled the wine in his cup. “We want Cersei to have every faith in you. Go back and tell her I beg her forgiveness. Tell her that you frightened me, that I want no conflict between us, that henceforth I shall do nothing without her consent.”

“But... her demands...”

“Oh, I’ll give her Pycelle.”

“You will?” Lancel seemed astonished.

Tyrion smiled. “I’ll release him on the morrow. I could swear that I hadn’t harmed a hair on his head, but it wouldn’t be strictly true. In any case, he’s well enough, though I won’t vouch for his vigor. The black cells are not a healthy place for a man his age. Cersei can keep him as a pet or

send him to the Wall, I don't care which, but I won't have him on the council."

"And Ser Jacelyn?"

"Tell my sister you believe you can win him away from me, given time. That ought to content her for a while."

"As you say." Lancel finished his wine.

"One last thing. With King Robert dead, it would be most embarrassing should his grieving widow suddenly grow great with child."

"My lord, I... we... the queen has commanded me not to..." His ears had turned Lannister crimson. "I spill my seed on her belly, my lord."

"A lovely belly, I have no doubt. Moisten it as often as you wish... but see that your dew falls nowhere else. I want no more nephews, is that clear?"

Ser Lancel made a stiff bow and took his leave.

Tyrion allowed himself a moment to feel sorry for the boy. *Another fool, and a weakling as well, but he does not deserve what Cersei and I are doing to him.* It was a kindness that his uncle Kevan had two other sons; this one was unlikely to live out the year. Cersei would have him killed out of hand if she learned he was betraying her, and if by some grace of the gods she did not, Lancel would never survive the day Jaime Lannister returned to King's Landing. The only question would be whether Jaime cut him down in a jealous rage, or Cersei murdered him first to keep Jaime from finding out. Tyrion's silver was on Cersei.

A restlessness was on him, and Tyrion knew full well he would not get back to sleep tonight. *Not here, in any case.* He found Podrick Payne asleep in a chair outside the door of the solar, and shook him by the shoulder. "Summon Bronn, and then run down to the stables and have two horses saddled."

The squire's eyes were cloudy with sleep. "Horses."

"Those big brown animals that love apples, I'm sure you've seen them. Four legs and a tail. But Bronn first."

The sellsword was not long in appearing. “Who pissed in your soup?” he demanded.

“Cersei, as ever. You’d think I’d be used to the taste by now, but never mind. My gentle sister seems to have mistaken me for Ned Stark.”

“I hear he was taller.”

“Not after Joff took off his head. You ought to have dressed more warmly, the night is chill.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

“Are all sellswords as clever as you?”

The city streets were dangerous, but with Bronn beside him Tyrion felt safe enough. The guards let him out a postern gate in the north wall, and they rode down Shadowblack Lane to the foot of Aegon’s High Hill, and thence onto Pigrun Alley, past rows of shuttered windows and tall timber-and-stone buildings whose upper stories leaned out so far over the street they almost kissed. The moon seemed to follow them as they went, playing peek-and-sneak among the chimneys. They encountered no one but a lone old crone, carrying a dead cat by the tail. She gave them a fearful look, as if she were afraid they might try to steal her dinner, and slunk off into the shadows without a word.

Tyrion reflected on the men who had been Hand before him, who had proved no match for his sister’s wiles. *How could they be? Men like that... too honest to live, too noble to shit, Cersei devours such fools every morning when she breaks her fast. The only way to defeat my sister is to play her own game, and that was something the Lords Stark and Arryn would never do.* Small wonder that both of them were dead, while Tyrion Lannister had never felt more alive. His stunted legs might make him a comic grotesque at a harvest ball, but *this* dance he knew.

Despite the hour, the brothel was crowded. Chataya greeted them pleasantly and escorted them to the common room. Bronn went upstairs with a dark-eyed girl from Dorne, but Alayaya was busy entertaining. “She will be so pleased to know you’ve come,” said Chataya. “I will see that the

turret room is made ready for you. Will my lord take a cup of wine while he waits?"

"I will," he said.

The wine was poor stuff compared to the vintages from the Arbor the house normally served. "You must forgive us, my lord," Chataya said. "I cannot find good wine at any price of late."

"You are not alone in that, I fear."

Chataya commiserated with him a moment, then excused herself and glided off. *A handsome woman*, Tyrion reflected as he watched her go. He had seldom seen such elegance and dignity in a whore. Though to be sure, she saw herself more as a kind of priestess. *Perhaps that is the secret. It is not what we do, so much as why we do it.* Somehow that thought comforted him.

A few of the other patrons were giving him sideways looks. The last time he ventured out, a man had spit on him... well, had tried to. Instead he'd spit on Bronn, and in future would do his spitting without teeth.

"Is milord feeling unloved?" Dancy slid into his lap and nibbled at his ear. "I have a cure for that."

Smiling, Tyrion shook his head. "You are too beautiful for words, sweetling, but I've grown fond of Alayaya's remedy."

"You've never *tried* mine. Milord never chooses anyone but 'Yaya. She's good but I'm better, don't you want to see?"

"Next time, perhaps." Tyrion had no doubt that Dancy would be a lively handful. She was pug-nosed and bouncy, with freckles and a mane of thick red hair that tumbled down past her waist. But he had Shae waiting for him at the manse.

Giggling, she put her hand between his thighs and squeezed him through his breeches. "I don't think *he* wants to wait till next time," she announced. "He wants to come out and count all my freckles, I think."

"Dancy." Alayaya stood in the doorway, dark and cool in gauzy green silk. "His lordship is come to visit me."

Tyrion gently disentangled himself from the other girl and stood. Dancy did not seem to mind. “Next time,” she reminded him. She put a finger in her mouth and sucked it.

As the black-skinned girl led him up the stairs, she said, “Poor Dancy. She has a fortnight to get my lord to choose her. Elsewise she loses her black pearls to Marei.”

Marei was a cool, pale, delicate girl Tyrion had noticed once or twice. Green eyes and porcelain skin, long straight silvery hair, very lovely, but too solemn by half. “I’d hate to have the poor child lose her pearls on account of me.”

“Then take her upstairs next time.”

“Maybe I will.”

She smiled. “I think not, my lord.”

*She’s right, Tyrion thought, I won’t. Shae may be only a whore, but I am faithful to her after my fashion.*

In the turret room, as he opened the door of the wardrobe, he looked at Alayaya curiously. “What do you do while I’m gone?”

She raised her arms and stretched like some sleek black cat. “Sleep. I am much better rested since you began to visit us, my lord. And Marei is teaching us to read, perhaps soon I will be able to pass the time with a book.”

“Sleep is good,” he said. “And books are better.” He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. Then it was down the shaft and through the tunnel.

As he left the stable on his piebald gelding, Tyrion heard the sound of music drifting over the rooftops. It was pleasant to think that men still sang, even in the midst of butchery and famine. Remembered notes filled his head, and for a moment he could almost hear Tysha as she’d sung to him half a lifetime ago. He reined up to listen. The tune was wrong, the words too faint to hear. A different song then, and why not? His sweet innocent Tysha had been a lie start to finish, only a whore his brother Jaime had hired to make him a man.



*I'm free of Tysha now, he thought. She's haunted me half my life, but I don't need her anymore, no more than I need Alayaya or Dancy or Marei, or the hundreds like them I've bedded with over the years. I have Shae now. Shae.*

The gates of the manse were closed and barred. Tyrion pounded until the ornate bronze eye clacked open. "It's me." The man who admitted him was one of Varys's prettier finds, a Braavosi daggerman with a harelip and a lazy eye. Tyrion had wanted no handsome young guardsmen loitering about Shae day after day. "Find me old, ugly, scarred men, preferably impotent," he had told the eunuch. "Men who prefer boys. Or men who prefer sheep, for that matter." Varys had not managed to come up with any sheeplovers, but he did find a eunuch strangler and a pair of foulsmelling Ibbenese who were as fond of axes as they were of each other. The others were as choice a lot of mercenaries as ever graced a dungeon, each uglier than the last. When Varys had paraded them before him, Tyrion had been afraid he'd gone too far, but Shae had never uttered a word of complaint. *And why would she? She has never complained of me, and I'm more hideous than all her guards together. Perhaps she does not even see ugliness.*

Even so, Tyrion would sooner have used some of his mountain clansmen to guard the manse; Chella's Black Ears perhaps, or the Moon Brothers. He had more faith in their iron loyalties and sense of honor than in the greed of sellswords. The risk was too great, however. All King's Landing knew the wildlings were his. If he sent the Black Ears here, it would only be a matter of time until the whole city knew the King's Hand was keeping a concubine.

One of the Ibbenese took his horse. "Have you woken her?" Tyrion asked him.

"No, m'lord."

"Good."

The fire in the bedchamber had burned down to embers, but the room was still warm. Shae had kicked off her blankets and sheets as she slept. She lay nude atop the featherbed, the soft curves of her young body limned in the faint glow from the hearth. Tyrion stood in the door and drank in the

sight of her. *Younger than Marei, sweeter than Dancy, more beautiful than Alayaya, she's all I need and more.* How could a whore look so clean and sweet and innocent, he wondered?

He had not intended to disturb her, but the sight of her was enough to make him hard. He let his garments fall to the floor, then crawled onto the bed and gently pushed her legs apart and kissed her between the thighs. Shae murmured in her sleep. He kissed her again, and licked at her secret sweetness, on and on until his beard and her cunt were both soaked. When she gave a soft moan and shuddered, he climbed up and thrust himself inside her and exploded almost at once.

Her eyes were open. She smiled and stroked his head and whispered, "I just had the sweetest dream, m'lord."

Tyrion nipped at her small hard nipple and nestled his head on her shoulder. He did not pull out of her; would that he never had to pull out of her. "This is no dream," he promised her. *It is real, all of it,* he thought, *the wars, the intrigues, the great bloody game, and me in the center of it... me, the dwarf, the monster, the one they scorned and laughed at, but now I hold it all, the power, the city, the girl. This was what I was made for, and gods forgive me, but I do love it...*

*And her. And her.*