



TYRION

When he heard noises through the thick wooden door of his cell, Tyrion Lannister prepared to die.

Past time, he thought. *Come on, come on, make an end to it.* He pushed himself to his feet. His legs were asleep from being folded under him. He bent down and rubbed the knives from them. *I will not go stumbling and waddling to the headsman's block.*

He wondered whether they would kill him down here in the dark or drag him through the city so Ser Ilyn Payne could lop his head off. After his mummer's farce of a trial, his sweet sister and loving father might prefer to dispose of him quietly, rather than risk a public execution. *I could tell the mob a few choice things, if they let me speak.* But would they be that foolish?

As the keys rattled and the door to his cell pushed inward, creaking, Tyrion pressed back against the dampness of the wall, wishing for a weapon. *I can still bite and kick. I'll die with the taste of blood in my mouth, that's something.* He wished he'd been able to think of some rousing last words. "Bugger you all" was not like to earn him much of a place in the histories.

Torchlight fell across his face. He shielded his eyes with a hand. "*Come on*, are you frightened of a dwarf? Do it, you son of a poxy whore." His voice had grown hoarse from disuse.

“Is that any way to speak about our lady mother?” The man moved forward, a torch in his left hand. “This is even more ghastly than my cell at Riverrun, though not quite so dank.”

For a moment Tyrion could not breathe. “You?”

“Well, most of me.” Jaime was gaunt, his hair hacked short. “I left a hand at Harrenhal. Bringing the Brave Companions across the narrow sea was not one of Father’s better notions.” He lifted his arm, and Tyrion saw the stump.

A bark of hysterical laughter burst from his lips. “Oh, gods,” he said. “Jaime, I am so sorry, but . . . gods be good, look at the two of us. Handless and Noseless, the Lannister boys.”

“There were days when my hand smelled so bad I wished I was noseless.” Jaime lowered the torch, so the light bathed his brother’s face. “An impressive scar.”

Tyrion turned away from the glare. “They made me fight a battle without my big brother to protect me.”

“I heard tell you almost burned the city down.”

“A filthy lie. I only burned the river.” Abruptly, Tyrion remembered where he was, and why. “Are you here to kill me?”

“Now that’s ungrateful. Perhaps I should leave you here to rot if you’re going to be so discourteous.”

“Rotting is not the fate Cersei has in mind for me.”

“Well no, if truth be told. You’re to be beheaded on the morrow, out on the old tourney grounds.”

Tyrion laughed again. “Will there be food? You’ll have to help me with my last words, my wits have been running about like a rat in a root cellar.”

“You won’t need last words. I’m rescuing you.” Jaime’s voice was strangely solemn.

“Who said I required rescue?”

“You know, I’d almost forgotten what an annoying little man you are. Now that you’ve reminded me, I do believe I’ll let Cersei cut your head off after all.”

“Oh no you won’t.” He waddled out of the cell. “Is it day or night up above? I’ve lost all sense of time.”

“Three hours past midnight. The city sleeps.” Jaime slid the torch back into its sconce, on the wall between the cells.

The corridor was so poorly lit that Tyrion almost stumbled on the turnkey, sprawled across the cold stone floor. He prodded him with a toe. “Is he dead?”

“Asleep. The other three as well. The eunuch dosed their wine with sweetsleep, but not enough to kill them. Or so he swears. He is waiting back at the stair, dressed up in a septon’s robe. You’re going down into the sewers, and from there to the river. A galley is waiting in the bay. Varys has agents in the Free Cities who will see that you do not lack for funds . . . but try not to be conspicuous. Cersei will send men after you, I have no doubt. You might do well to take another name.”

“Another name? Oh, certainly. And when the Faceless Men come to kill me, I’ll say, ‘No, you have the wrong man, I’m a *different* dwarf with a hideous facial scar.’” Both Lannisters laughed at the absurdity of it all. Then Jaime went to one knee and kissed him quickly once on each cheek, his lips brushing against the puckered ribbon of scar tissue.

“Thank you, Brother,” Tyrion said. “For my life.”

“It was . . . a debt I owed you.” Jaime’s voice was strange.

“A debt?” He cocked his head. “I do not understand.”

“Good. Some doors are best left closed.”

“Oh, dear,” said Tyrion. “Is there something grim and ugly behind it? Could it be that someone said something *cruel* about me once? I’ll try not to weep. Tell me.”

“Tyrion . . .”

Jaime is afraid. “Tell me,” Tyrion said again.

His brother looked away. “Tysha,” he said softly.

“Tysha?” His stomach tightened. “What of her?”

“She was no whore. I never bought her for you. That was a lie that Father commanded me to tell. Tysha was . . . she was what she seemed to be. A

crofter's daughter, chance met on the road."

Tyrion could hear the faint sound of his own breath whistling hollowly through the scar of his nose. Jaime could not meet his eyes. *Tysha*. He tried to remember what she had looked like. *A girl, she was only a girl, no older than Sansa*. "My wife," he croaked. "She wed me."

"For your gold, Father said. She was lowborn, you were a Lannister of Casterly Rock. All she wanted was the gold, which made her no different from a whore, so . . . so it would not be a lie, not truly, and . . . he said that you required a sharp lesson. That you would learn from it, and thank me later . . ."

"*Thank you?*" Tyrion's voice was choked. "He gave her to his guards. A barracks full of guards. He made me . . . watch." *Aye, and more than watch. I took her too . . . my wife . . .*

"I never knew he would do that. You must believe me."

"Oh, *must* I?" Tyrion snarled. "Why should I believe you about anything, ever? She was my *wife!*"

"Tyrion—"

He hit him. It was a slap, backhanded, but he put all his strength into it, all his fear, all his rage, all his pain. Jaime was squatting, unbalanced. The blow sent him tumbling backward to the floor. "I . . . I suppose I earned that."

"Oh, you've earned more than that, Jaime. You and my sweet sister and our loving father, yes, I can't begin to tell you what you've earned. But you'll have it, that I swear to you. A Lannister always pays his debts." Tyrion waddled away, almost stumbling over the turnkey again in his haste. Before he had gone a dozen yards, he bumped up against an iron gate that closed the passage. *Oh, gods*. It was all he could do not to scream.

Jaime came up behind him. "I have the gaoler's keys."

"Then use them." Tyrion stepped aside.

Jaime unlocked the gate, pushed it open, and stepped through. He looked back over his shoulder. "Are you coming?"

"Not with you." Tyrion stepped through. "Give me the keys and go. I will find Varys on my own." He cocked his head and stared up at his brother

with his mismatched eyes. “Jaime, can you fight left-handed?”

“Rather less well than you,” Jaime said bitterly.

“Good. Then we will be well matched if we should ever meet again. The cripple and the dwarf.”

Jaime handed him the ring of keys. “I gave you the truth. You owe me the same. Did you do it? Did you kill him?”

The question was another knife, twisting in his guts. “Are you sure you want to know?” asked Tyrion. “Joffrey would have been a worse king than Aerys ever was. He stole his father’s dagger and gave it to a footpad to slit the throat of Brandon Stark, did you know that?”

“I . . . I thought he might have.”

“Well, a son takes after his father. Joff would have killed me as well, once he came into his power. For the crime of being short and ugly, of which I am so conspicuously guilty.”

“You have not answered my question.”

“You poor stupid blind crippled fool. Must I spell every little thing out for you? Very well. Cersei is a lying whore, she’s been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and probably Moon Boy for all I know. And I am the monster they all say I am. Yes, I killed your vile son.” He made himself grin. It must have been a hideous sight to see, there in the torchlit gloom.

Jaime turned without a word and walked away.

Tyrion watched him go, striding on his long strong legs, and part of him wanted to call out, to tell him that it wasn’t true, to beg for his forgiveness. But then he thought of Tysha, and he held his silence. He listened to the receding footsteps until he could hear them no longer, then waddled off to look for Varys.

The eunuch was lurking in the dark of a twisting turnpike stair, garbed in a moth-eaten brown robe with a hood that hid the paleness of his face. “You were so long, I feared that something had gone amiss,” he said when he saw Tyrion.

“Oh, no,” Tyrion assured him, in poisonous tones. “What could *possibly* have gone amiss?” He twisted his head back to stare up. “I sent for you during my trial.”

“I could not come. The queen had me watched, night and day. I dared not help you.”

“You’re helping me now.”

“Am I? Ah.” Varys giggled. It seemed strangely out of place in this place of cold stone and echoing darkness. “Your brother can be most persuasive.”

“Varys, you are as cold and slimy as a slug, has anyone ever told you? You did your best to kill me. Perhaps I ought to return the favor.”

The eunuch sighed. “The faithful dog is kicked, and no matter how the spider weaves, he is never loved. But if you slay me here, I fear for you, my lord. You may never find your way back to daylight.” His eyes glittered in the shifting torchlight, dark and wet. “These tunnels are full of traps for the unwary.”

Tyrion snorted. “Unwary? I’m the wariest man who ever lived, you helped see to that.” He rubbed at his nose. “So tell me, wizard, where is my innocent maiden wife?”

“I have found no trace of Lady Sansa in King’s Landing, sad to say. Nor of Ser Dontos Hollard, who by rights should have turned up somewhere drunk by now. They were seen together on the serpentine steps the night she vanished. After that, nothing. There was much confusion that night. My little birds are silent.” Varys gave a gentle tug at the dwarf’s sleeve and pulled him into the stair. “My lord, we must away. Your path is down.”

That’s no lie, at least. Tyrion waddled along in the eunuch’s wake, his heels scraping against the rough stone as they descended. It was very cold within the stairwell, a damp bone-chilling cold that set him to shivering at once. “What part of the dungeons are these?” he asked.

“Maegor the Cruel decreed four levels of dungeons for his castle,” Varys replied. “On the upper level, there are large cells where common criminals may be confined together. They have narrow windows set high in the walls. The second level has the smaller cells where highborn captives are held. They have no windows, but torches in the halls cast light through the bars. On the third level the cells are smaller and the doors are wood. The black cells, men call them. That was where you were kept, and Eddard Stark before you. But there is a level lower still. Once a man is taken down to the fourth level, he never sees the sun again, nor hears a human voice, nor

breathes a breath free of agonizing pain. Maegor had the cells on the fourth level built for torment.” They had reached the bottom of the steps. An unlighted door opened before them. “This is the fourth level. Give me your hand, my lord. It is safer to walk in darkness here. There are things you would not wish to see.”

Tyrion hung back a moment. Varys had already betrayed him once. Who knew what game the eunuch was playing? And what better place to murder a man than down in the darkness, in a place that no one knew existed? His body might never be found.

On the other hand, what choice did he have? To go back up the steps and walk out the main gate? No, that would not serve.

Jaime would not be afraid, he thought, before he remembered what Jaime had done to him. He took the eunuch by the hand and let himself be led through the black, following the soft scrape of leather on stone. Varys walked quickly, from time to time whispering, “Careful, there are three steps ahead,” or, “The tunnel slopes downward here, my lord.” *I arrived here a King’s Hand, riding through the gates at the head of my own sworn men*, Tyrion reflected, *and I leave like a rat scuttling through the dark, holding hands with a spider*.

A light appeared ahead of them, too dim to be daylight, and grew as they hurried toward it. After a while he could see it was an arched doorway, closed off by another iron gate. Varys produced a key. They stepped through into a small round chamber. Five other doors opened off the room, each barred in iron. There was an opening in the ceiling as well, and a series of rungs set in the wall below, leading upward. An ornate brazier stood to one side, fashioned in the shape of a dragon’s head. The coals in the beast’s yawning mouth had burnt down to embers, but they still glowed with a sullen orange light. Dim as it was, the light was welcome after the blackness of the tunnel.

The juncture was otherwise empty, but on the floor was a mosaic of a three-headed dragon wrought in red and black tiles. Something niggled at Tyrion for a moment. Then it came to him. *This is the place Shae told me of, when Varys first led her to my bed*. “We are below the Tower of the Hand.”

“Yes.” Frozen hinges screamed in protest as Varys pulled open a long-closed door. Flakes of rust drifted to the floor. “This will take us out to the river.”

Tyrion walked slowly to the ladder, ran his hand across the lowest rung. “This will take me up to my bedchamber.”

“Your lord father’s bedchamber now.”

He looked up the shaft. “How far must I climb?”

“My lord, you are too weak for such follies, and there is besides no time. We must go.”

“I have business above. How far?”

“Two hundred and thirty rungs, but whatever you intend—”

“Two hundred and thirty rungs, and then?”

“The tunnel to the left, but hear me—”

“How far along to the bedchamber?” Tyrion lifted a foot to the lowest rung of the ladder.

“No more than sixty feet. Keep one hand on the wall as you go. You will feel the doors. The bedchamber is the third.” He sighed. “This is folly, my lord. Your brother has given you your life back. Would you cast it away, and mine with it?”

“Varys, the only thing I value less than my life just now is yours. Wait for me here.” He turned his back on the eunuch and began to climb, counting silently as he went.

Rung by rung, he ascended into darkness. At first he could see the dim outline of each rung as he grasped it, and the rough grey texture of the stone behind, but as he climbed the black grew thicker. *Thirteen fourteen fifteen sixteen*. By thirty, his arms trembled with the strain of pulling. He paused a moment to catch his breath and glanced down. A circle of faint light shone far below, half obscured by his own feet. Tyrion resumed his ascent. *Thirty-nine forty forty-one*. By fifty, his legs burned. The ladder was endless, numbing. *Sixty-eight sixty-nine seventy*. By eighty, his back was a dull agony. Yet still he climbed. He could not have said why. *One thirteen one fourteen one fifteen*.

At two hundred and thirty, the shaft was black as pitch, but he could *feel* the warm air flowing from the tunnel to his left, like the breath of some great beast. He poked about awkwardly with a foot and edged off the ladder. The tunnel was even more cramped than the shaft. Any man of normal size would have had to crawl on hands and knees, but Tyrion was short enough to walk upright. *At last, a place made for dwarfs.* His boots scuffed softly against the stone. He walked slowly, counting steps, feeling for gaps in the walls. Soon he began to hear voices, muffled and indistinct at first, then clearer. He listened more closely. Two of his father's guardsmen were joking about the Imp's whore, saying how sweet it would be to fuck her, and how bad she must want a real cock in place of the dwarf's stunted little thing. "Most like it's got a crook in it," said Lum. That led him into a discussion of how Tyrion would die on the morrow. "He'll weep like a woman and beg for mercy, you'll see," Lum insisted. Lester figured he'd face the axe brave as a lion, being a Lannister, and he was willing to bet his new boots on it. "Ah, shit in your boots," said Lum, "you know they'd never fit these feet o'mine. Tell you what, if I win you can scour my bloody mail for a fortnight."

For the space of a few feet, Tyrion could hear every word of their haggling, but when he moved on, the voices faded quickly. *Small wonder Varys did not want me to climb the bloody ladder,* Tyrion thought, smiling in the dark. *Little birds indeed.*

He came to the third door and fumbled about for a long time before his fingers brushed a small iron hook set between two stones. When he pulled down on it, there was a soft rumble that sounded loud as an avalanche in the stillness, and a square of dull orange light opened a foot to his left.

The hearth! He almost laughed. The fireplace was full of hot ash, and a black log with a hot orange heart burning within. He edged past gingerly, taking quick steps so as not to burn his boots, the warm cinders crunching softly under his heels. When he found himself in what had once been his bedchamber, he stood a long moment, breathing the silence. Had his father heard? Would he reach for his sword, raise the hue and cry?

"M'lord?" a woman's voice called.

That might have hurt me once, when I still felt pain. The first step was the hardest. When he reached the bed Tyrion pulled the draperies aside and there she was, turning toward him with a sleepy smile on her lips. It died when she saw him. She pulled the blankets up to her chin, as if that would protect her.

“Were you expecting someone taller, sweetling?”

Big wet tears filled her eyes. “I never meant those things I said, the queen made me. *Please*. Your father frightens me so.” She sat up, letting the blanket slide down to her lap. Beneath it she was naked, but for the chain about her throat. A chain of linked golden hands, each holding the next.

“My lady Shae,” Tyrion said softly. “All the time I sat in the black cell waiting to die, I kept remembering how beautiful you were. In silk or roughspun or nothing at all . . .”

“M’lord will be back soon. You should go, or . . . did you come to take me away?”

“Did you ever like it?” He cupped her cheek, remembering all the times he had done this before. All the times he’d slid his hands around her waist, squeezed her small firm breasts, stroked her short dark hair, touched her lips, her cheeks, her ears. All the times he had opened her with a finger to probe her secret sweetness and make her moan. “Did you ever like my touch?”

“More than anything,” she said, “my giant of Lannister.”

That was the worst thing you could have said, sweetling.

Tyrion slid a hand under his father’s chain, and twisted. The links tightened, digging into her neck. “For hands of gold are always cold, but a woman’s hands are warm,” he said. He gave cold hands another twist as the warm ones beat away his tears.

Afterward he found Lord Tywin’s dagger on the bedside table and shoved it through his belt. A lion-headed mace, a poleaxe, and a crossbow had been hung on the walls. The poleaxe would be clumsy to wield inside a castle, and the mace was too high to reach, but a large wood-and-iron chest had been placed against the wall directly under the crossbow. He climbed up, pulled down the bow and a leather quiver packed with quarrels, jammed a

foot into the stirrup, and pushed down until the bowstring cocked. Then he slipped a bolt into the notch.

Jaime had lectured him more than once on the drawbacks of crossbows. If Lum and Lester emerged from wherever they were talking, he'd never have time to reload, but at least he'd take one down to hell with him. Lum, if he had a choice. *You'll have to clean your own mail, Lum. You lose.*

Waddling to the door, he listened a moment, then eased it open slowly. A lamp burned in a stone niche, casting wan yellow light over the empty hallway. Only the flame was moving. Tyrion slid out, holding the crossbow down against his leg.

He found his father where he knew he'd find him, seated in the dimness of the privy tower, bedrobe hiked up around his hips. At the sound of steps, Lord Tywin raised his eyes.

Tyrion gave him a mocking half bow. "My lord."

"Tyrion." If he was afraid, Tywin Lannister gave no hint of it. "Who released you from your cell?"

"I'd love to tell you, but I swore a holy oath."

"The eunuch," his father decided. "I'll have his head for this. Is that my crossbow? Put it down."

"Will you punish me if I refuse, Father?"

"This escape is folly. You are not to be killed, if that is what you fear. It's still my intent to send you to the Wall, but I could not do it without Lord Tyrell's consent. Put down the crossbow and we will go back to my chambers and talk of it."

"We can talk here just as well. Perhaps I don't choose to go to the Wall, Father. It's bloody cold up there, and I believe I've had enough coldness from you. So just tell me something, and I'll be on my way. One simple question, you owe me that much."

"I owe you nothing."

"You've given me less than that, all my life, but you'll give me this. What did you do with Tysha?"

"Tysha?"

He does not even remember her name. “The girl I married.”

“Oh, yes. Your first whore.”

Tyrion took aim at his father’s chest. “The next time you say that word, I’ll kill you.”

“You do not have the courage.”

“Shall we find out? It’s a short word, and it seems to come so easily to your lips.” Tyrion gestured impatiently with the bow. “Tysha. What did you do with her, after my little lesson?”

“I don’t recall.”

“Try harder. Did you have her killed?”

His father pursed his lips. “There was no reason for that, she’d learned her place . . . and had been well paid for her day’s work, I seem to recall. I suppose the steward sent her on her way. I never thought to inquire.”

“On her way *where*?”

“Wherever whores go.”

Tyrion’s finger clenched. The crossbow *whanged* just as Lord Tywin started to rise. The bolt slammed into him above the groin and he sat back down with a grunt. The quarrel had sunk deep, right to the fletching. Blood seeped out around the shaft, dripping down into his pubic hair and over his bare thighs. “You shot me,” he said incredulously, his eyes glassy with shock.

“You always were quick to grasp a situation, my lord,” Tyrion said. “That must be why you’re the Hand of the King.”

“You . . . you are no . . . no son of mine.”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong, Father. Why, I believe I’m you writ small. Do me a kindness now, and die quickly. I have a ship to catch.”

For once, his father did what Tyrion asked him. The proof was the sudden stench, as his bowels loosened in the moment of death. *Well, he was in the right place for it*, Tyrion thought. But the stink that filled the privy gave ample evidence that the oft-repeated jape about his father was just another lie.

Lord Tywin Lannister did not, in the end, shit gold.