



TYRION

Tyrion,” Ser Kevan Lannister said wearily, “if you are indeed innocent of Joffrey’s death, you should have no difficulty proving it at trial.”

Tyrion turned from the window. “Who is to judge me?”

“Justice belongs to the throne. The king is dead, but your father remains Hand. Since it is his own son who stands accused and his grandson who was the victim, he has asked Lord Tyrell and Prince Oberyne to sit in judgment with him.”

Tyrion was scarcely reassured. Mace Tyrell had been Joffrey’s good-father, however briefly, and the Red Viper was . . . well, a snake. “Will I be allowed to demand trial by battle?”

“I would not advise that.”

“Why not?” It had saved him in the Vale, why not here? “Answer me, Uncle. Will I be allowed a trial by battle, and a champion to prove my innocence?”

“Certainly, if such is your wish. However, you had best know that your sister means to name Ser Gregor Clegane as *her* champion, in the event of such a trial.”

The bitch checks my moves before I make them. A pity she didn’t choose a Kettleblack. Bronn would make short work of any of the three brothers, but the Mountain That Rides was a kettle of a different color. “I shall need to

sleep on this.” *I need to speak with Bronn, and soon.* He didn’t want to think about what this was like to cost him. Bronn had a lofty notion of what his skin was worth. “Does Cersei have witnesses against me?”

“More every day.”

“Then I must have witnesses of my own.”

“Tell me who you would have, and Ser Addam will send the Watch to bring them to the trial.”

“I would sooner find them myself.”

“You stand accused of regicide and kinslaying. Do you truly imagine you will be allowed to come and go as you please?” Ser Kevan waved at the table. “You have quill, ink, and parchment. Write the names of such witnesses as you require, and I shall do all in my power to produce them, you have my word as a Lannister. But you shall not leave this tower, except to go to trial.”

Tyrion would not demean himself by begging. “Will you permit my squire to come and go? The boy Podrick Payne?”

“Certainly, if that is your wish. I shall send him to you.”

“Do so. Sooner would be better than later, and now would be better than sooner.” He waddled to the writing table. But when he heard the door open, he turned back and said, “Uncle?”

Ser Kevan paused. “Yes?”

“I did not do this.”

“I wish I could believe that, Tyrion.”

When the door closed, Tyrion Lannister pulled himself up into the chair, sharpened a quill, and pulled a blank parchment. *Who will speak for me?* He dipped his quill in the inkpot.

The sheet was still maiden when Podrick Payne appeared, sometime later. “My lord,” the boy said.

Tyrion put down the quill. “Find Bronn and bring him at once. Tell him there’s gold in it, more gold than he’s ever dreamt of, and see that you don’t return without him.”

“Yes, my lord. I mean, no. I won’t. Return.” He went.

He had not returned by sunset, nor by moonrise. Tyrion fell asleep in the window seat to wake stiff and sore at dawn. A serving man brought porridge and apples to break his fast, with a horn of ale. He ate at the table, the blank parchment before him. An hour later, the serving man returned for the bowl. "Have you seen my squire?" Tyrion asked him. The man shook his head.

Sighing, he turned back to the table, and dipped the quill again. *Sansa*, he wrote upon the parchment. He sat staring at the name, his teeth clenched so hard they hurt.

Assuming Joffrey had not simply choked to death on a bit of food, which even Tyrion found hard to swallow, Sansa must have poisoned him. *Joff practically put his cup down in her lap, and he'd given her ample reason.* Any doubts Tyrion might have had vanished when his wife did. *One flesh, one heart, one soul.* His mouth twisted. *She wasted no time proving how much those vows meant to her, did she? Well, what did you expect, dwarf?*

And yet . . . where would Sansa have gotten poison? He could not believe the girl had acted alone in this. *Do I really want to find her?* Would the judges believe that Tyrion's child bride had poisoned a king without her husband's knowledge? *I wouldn't.* Cersei would insist that they had done the deed together.

Even so, he gave the parchment to his uncle the next day. Ser Kevan frowned at it. "Lady Sansa is your only witness?"

"I will think of others in time."

"Best think of them now. The judges mean to begin the trial three days hence."

"That's too soon. You have me shut up here under guard, how am I to find witnesses to my innocence?"

"Your sister's had no difficulty finding witnesses to your guilt." Ser Kevan rolled up the parchment. "Ser Addam has men hunting for your wife. Varys has offered a hundred stags for word of her whereabouts, and a hundred dragons for the girl herself. If the girl can be found she will be found, and I shall bring her to you. I see no harm in husband and wife sharing the same cell and giving comfort to one another."

“You are too kind. Have you seen my squire?”

“I sent him to you yesterday. Did he not come?”

“He came,” Tyrion admitted, “and then he went.”

“I shall send him to you again.”

But it was the next morning before Podrick Payne returned. He stepped inside the room hesitantly, with fear written all over his face. Bronn came in behind him. The sellsword knight wore a jerkin studded with silver and a heavy riding cloak, with a pair of fine-tooled leather gloves thrust through his swordbelt.

One look at Bronn’s face gave Tyrion a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. “It took you long enough.”

“The boy begged, or I wouldn’t have come at all. I am expected at Castle Stokeworth for supper.”

“Stokeworth?” Tyrion hopped from the bed. “And pray, what is there for you in Stokeworth?”

“A bride.” Bronn smiled like a wolf contemplating a lost lamb. “I’m to wed Lollys the day after next.”

“Lollys.” *Perfect, bloody perfect.* Lady Tanda’s lackwit daughter gets a knightly husband and a father of sorts for the bastard in her belly, and Ser Bronn of the Blackwater climbs another rung. It had Cersei’s stinking fingers all over it. “My bitch sister has sold you a lame horse. The girl’s dim-witted.”

“If I wanted wits, I’d marry you.”

“Lollys is big with another man’s child.”

“And when she pops him out, I’ll get her big with mine.”

“She’s not even heir to Stokeworth,” Tyrion pointed out. “She has an elder sister. Falyse. A *married* sister.”

“Married ten years, and still barren,” said Bronn. “Her lord husband shuns her bed. It’s said he prefers virgins.”

“He could prefer goats and it wouldn’t matter. The lands will still pass to his wife when Lady Tanda dies.”

“Unless Falyse should die before her mother.”

Tyrion wondered whether Cersei had any notion of the sort of serpent she'd given Lady Tanda to suckle. *And if she does, would she care?* "Why are you here, then?"

Bronn shrugged. "You once told me that if anyone ever asked me to sell you out, you'd double the price."

Yes. "Is it two wives you want, or two castles?"

"One of each would serve. But if you want me to kill Gregor Clegane for you, it had best be a damned *big* castle."

The Seven Kingdoms were full of highborn maidens, but even the oldest, poorest, and ugliest spinster in the realm would balk at wedding such lowborn scum as Bronn. *Unless she was soft of body and soft of head, with a fatherless child in her belly from having been raped half a hundred times.* Lady Tanda had been so desperate to find a husband for Lollys that she had even pursued Tyrion for a time, and that had been *before* half of King's Landing enjoyed her. No doubt Cersei had sweetened the offer somehow, and Bronn *was* a knight now, which made him a suitable match for a younger daughter of a minor house.

"I find myself woefully short of both castles and highborn maidens at the moment," Tyrion admitted. "But I can offer you gold and gratitude, as before."

"I have gold. What can I buy with gratitude?"

"You might be surprised. A Lannister pays his debts."

"Your sister is a Lannister too."

"My lady wife is heir to Winterfell. Should I emerge from this with my head still on my shoulders, I may one day rule the north in her name. I could carve you out a big piece of it."

"If and when and might be," said Bronn. "And it's bloody cold up there. Lollys is soft, warm, and close. I could be poking her two nights hence."

"Not a prospect I would relish."

"Is that so?" Bronn grinned. "Admit it, Imp. Given a choice between fucking Lollys and fighting the Mountain, you'd have your breeches down and cock up before a man could blink."

He knows me too bloody well. Tyrion tried a different tack. “I’d heard that Ser Gregor was wounded on the Red Fork, and again at Duskendale. The wounds are bound to slow him.”

Bronn looked annoyed. “He was never fast. Only freakish big and freakish strong. I’ll grant you, he’s quicker than you’d expect for a man that size. He has a monstrous long reach, and doesn’t seem to feel blows the way a normal man would.”

“Does he frighten you so much?” asked Tyrion, hoping to provoke him.

“If he didn’t frighten me, I’d be a bloody fool.” Bronn gave a shrug. “Might be I could take him. Dance around him until he was so tired of hacking at me that he couldn’t lift his sword. Get him off his feet somehow. When they’re flat on their backs it don’t matter how tall they are. Even so, it’s chancy. One misstep and I’m dead. Why should I risk it? I like you well enough, ugly little whoreson that you are . . . but if I fight your battle, I lose either way. Either the Mountain spills my guts, or I kill him and lose Stokeworth. I sell my sword, I don’t give it away. I’m not your bloody brother.”

“No,” said Tyrion sadly. “You’re not.” He waved a hand. “Begone, then. Run to Stokeworth and Lady Lollys. May you find more joy in your marriage bed than I ever found in mine.”

Bronn hesitated at the door. “What will you do, Imp?”

“Kill Gregor myself. Won’t *that* make for a jolly song?”

“I hope I hear them sing it.” Bronn grinned one last time, and walked out of the door, the castle, and his life.

Pod shuffled his feet. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? Is it your fault that Bronn’s an insolent black-hearted rogue? He’s always been an insolent black-hearted rogue. That’s what I liked about him.” Tyrion poured himself a cup of wine and took it to the window seat. Outside the day was grey and rainy, but the prospect was still more cheerful than his. He could send Podrick Payne questing after Shagga, he supposed, but there were so many hiding places in the deep of the kingswood that outlaws often evaded capture for decades. *And Pod sometimes has difficulty finding the kitchens when I sent him down for cheese.* Timett son of Timett

would likely be back in the Mountains of the Moon by now. And despite what he'd told Bronn, going up against Ser Gregor Clegane in his own person would be a bigger farce than Joffrey's jousting dwarfs. He did not intend to die with gales of laughter ringing in his ears. *So much for trial by combat.*

Ser Kevan paid him another call later that day, and again the day after. Sansa had not been found, his uncle informed him politely. Nor the fool Ser Dontos, who'd vanished the same night. Did Tyrion have any more witnesses he wished to summon? He did not. *How do I bloody well prove I didn't poison the wine, when a thousand people saw me fill Joff's cup?*

He did not sleep at all that night.

Instead he lay in the dark, staring up at the canopy and counting his ghosts. He saw Tysha smiling as she kissed him, saw Sansa naked and shivering in fear. He saw Joffrey clawing his throat, the blood running down his neck as his face turned black. He saw Cersei's eyes, Bronn's wolfish smile, Shae's wicked grin. Even thought of Shae could not arouse him. He fondled himself, thinking that perhaps if he woke his cock and satisfied it, he might rest more easily afterward, but it was no good.

And then it was dawn, and time for his trial to begin.

It was not Ser Kevan who came for him that morning, but Ser Addam Marbrand with a dozen gold cloaks. Tyrion had broken his fast on boiled eggs, burned bacon, and fried bread, and dressed in his finest. "Ser Addam," he said. "I had thought my father might send the Kingsguard to escort me to trial. I am still a member of the royal family, am I not?"

"You are, my lord, but I fear that most of the Kingsguard stand witness against you. Lord Tywin felt it would not be proper for them to serve as your guards."

"Gods forbid we do anything *improper*. Please, lead on."

He was to be tried in the throne room, where Joffrey had died. As Ser Addam marched him through the towering bronze doors and down the long carpet, he felt the eyes upon him. Hundreds had crowded in to see him judged. At least he hoped that was why they had come. *For all I know, they're all witnesses against me.* He spied Queen Margaery up in the gallery, pale and beautiful in her mourning. *Twice wed and twice widowed,*

and only sixteen. Her mother stood tall to one side of her, her grandmother small on the other, with her ladies in waiting and her father's household knights packing the rest of the gallery.

The dais still stood beneath the empty Iron Throne, though all but one table had been removed. Behind it sat stout Lord Mace Tyrell in a gold mantle over green, and slender Prince Oberyn Martell in flowing robes of striped orange, yellow, and scarlet. Lord Tywin Lannister sat between them. *Perhaps there's hope for me yet.* The Dornishman and the Highgardener despised each other. *If I can find a way to use that . . .*

The High Septon began with a prayer, asking the Father Above to guide them to justice. When he was done the father below leaned forward to say, "Tyrion, did you kill King Joffrey?"

He would not waste a heartbeat. "No."

"Well, that's a relief," said Oberyn Martell dryly.

"Did Sansa Stark do it, then?" Lord Tyrell demanded.

I would have, if I'd been her. Yet wherever Sansa was and whatever her part in this might have been, she remained his wife. He had wrapped the cloak of his protection about her shoulders, though he'd had to stand on a fool's back to do it. "The gods killed Joffrey. He choked on his pigeon pie."

Lord Tyrell reddened. "You would blame the bakers?"

"Them, or the pigeons. Just leave me out of it." Tyrion heard nervous laughter, and knew he'd made a mistake. *Guard your tongue, you little fool, before it digs your grave.*

"There are witnesses against you," Lord Tywin said. "We shall hear them first. Then you may present your own witnesses. You are to speak only with our leave."

There was naught that Tyrion could do but nod.

Ser Addam had told it true; the first man ushered in was Ser Balon Swann of the Kingsguard. "Lord Hand," he began, after the High Septon had sworn him to speak only truth, "I had the honor to fight beside your son on the bridge of ships. He is a brave man for all his size, and I will not believe he did this thing."

A murmur went through the hall, and Tyrion wondered what mad game Cersei was playing. *Why offer a witness that believes me innocent?* He soon learned. Ser Balon spoke reluctantly of how he had pulled Tyrion away from Joffrey on the day of the riot. “He did strike His Grace, that’s so. It was a fit of wrath, no more. A summer storm. The mob near killed us all.”

“In the days of the Targaryens, a man who struck one of the blood royal would lose the hand he struck him with,” observed the Red Viper of Dorne. “Did the dwarf regrow his little hand, or did you White Swords forget your duty?”

“He was of the blood royal himself,” Ser Balon answered. “And the King’s Hand beside.”

“No,” Lord Tywin said. “He was *acting* Hand, in my stead.”

Ser Meryn Trant was pleased to expand on Ser Balon’s account, when he took his place as witness. “He knocked the king to the ground and began kicking him. He shouted that it was unjust that His Grace had escaped unharmed from the mobs.”

Tyrion began to grasp his sister’s plan. *She began with a man known to be honest, and milked him for all he would give. Every witness to follow will tell a worse tale, until I seem as bad as Maegor the Cruel and Aerys the Mad together, with a pinch of Aegon the Unworthy for spice.*

Ser Meryn went on to relate how Tyrion had stopped Joffrey’s chastisement of Sansa Stark. “The dwarf asked His Grace if he knew what had happened to Aerys Targaryen. When Ser Boros spoke up in defense of the king, the Imp threatened to have him killed.”

Blount himself came next, to echo *that* sorry tale. Whatever dislike Ser Boros might harbor toward Cersei for dismissing him from the Kingsguard, he said the words she wanted all the same.

Tyrion could no longer hold his tongue. “Tell the judges what Joffrey was *doing*, why don’t you?”

The big jowly man glared at him. “You told your savages to kill me if I opened my mouth, that’s what I’ll tell them.”

“Tyrion,” Lord Tywin said. “You are to speak only when we call upon you. Take this for a warning.”

Tyrion subsided, seething.

The Kettleblacks came next, all three of them in turn. Osney and Osfryd told the tale of his supper with Cersei before the Battle of the Blackwater, and of the threats he'd made.

"He told Her Grace that he meant to do her harm," said Ser Osfryd. "To hurt her." His brother Osney elaborated. "He said he would wait for a day when she was happy, and make her joy turn to ashes in her mouth." Neither mentioned Alayaya.

Ser Osmund Kettleblack, a vision of chivalry in immaculate scale armor and white wool cloak, swore that King Joffrey had long known that his uncle Tyrion meant to murder him. "It was the day they gave me the white cloak, my lords," he told the judges. "That brave boy said to me, 'Good Ser Osmund, guard me well, for my uncle loves me not. He means to be king in my place.'"

That was more than Tyrion could stomach. "*Liar!*" He took two steps forward before the gold cloaks dragged him back.

Lord Tywin frowned. "Must we have you chained hand and foot like a common brigand?"

Tyrion gnashed his teeth. *A second mistake, fool, fool, fool of a dwarf. Keep your calm or you're doomed.* "No. I beg your pardons, my lords. His lies angered me."

"His truths, you mean," said Cersei. "Father, I beg you to put him in fetters, for your own protection. You see how he is."

"I see he's a dwarf," said Prince Oberyn. "The day I fear a dwarf's wrath is the day I drown myself in a cask of red."

"We need no fetters." Lord Tywin glanced at the windows, and rose. "The hour grows late. We shall resume on the morrow."

That night, alone in his tower cell with a blank parchment and a cup of wine, Tyrion found himself thinking of his wife. Not Sansa; his *first* wife, Tysha. *The whore wife, not the wolf wife.* Her love for him had been pretense, and yet he had believed, and found joy in that belief. *Give me sweet lies, and keep your bitter truths.* He drank his wine and thought of Shae. Later, when Ser Kevan paid his nightly visit, Tyrion asked for Varys.

“You believe the eunuch will speak in your defense?”

“I won’t know until I have talked with him. Send him here, Uncle, if you would be so good.”

“As you wish.”

Maesters Ballabar and Frenken opened the second day of trial. They had opened King Joffrey’s noble corpse as well, they swore, and found no morsel of pigeon pie nor any other food lodged in the royal throat. “It was poison that killed him, my lords,” said Ballabar, as Frenken nodded gravely.

Then they brought forth Grand Maester Pycelle, leaning heavily on a twisted cane and shaking as he walked, a few white hairs sprouting from his long chicken’s neck. He had grown too frail to stand, so the judges permitted a chair to be brought in for him, and a table as well. On the table were laid a number of small jars. Pycelle was pleased to put a name to each.

“Greycap,” he said in a quavery voice, “from the toadstool. Nightshade, sweetsleep, demon’s dance. This is blindeye. Widow’s blood, this one is called, for the color. A cruel potion. It shuts down a man’s bladder and bowels, until he drowns in his own poisons. This wolfsbane, here basilisk venom, and this one the tears of Lys. Yes. I know them all. The Imp Tyrion Lannister stole them from my chambers, when he had me falsely imprisoned.”

“*Pycelle*,” Tyrion called out, risking his father’s wrath, “could any of these poisons choke off a man’s breath?”

“No. For that, you must turn to a rarer poison. When I was a boy at the Citadel, my teachers named it simply *the strangler*.”

“But this rare poison was not found, was it?”

“No, my lord.” Pycelle blinked at him. “You used it all to kill the noblest child the gods ever put on this good earth.”

Tyrion’s anger overwhelmed his sense. “Joffrey was cruel and stupid, but I did not kill him. Have my head off if you like, I had no hand in my nephew’s death.”

“*Silence!*” Lord Tywin said. “I have told you thrice. The next time, you shall be gagged and chained.”

After Pycelle came the procession, endless and wearisome. Lords and ladies and noble knights, highborn and humble alike, they had all been present at the wedding feast, had all seen Joffrey choke, his face turning as black as a Dornish plum. Lord Redwyne, Lord Celtigar, and Ser Flement Brax had heard Tyrion threaten the king; two serving men, a juggler, Lord Gyles, Ser Hobber Redwyne, and Ser Philip Foote had observed him fill the wedding chalice; Lady Merryweather swore that she had seen the dwarf drop something into the king's wine while Joff and Margaery were cutting the pie; old Estermont, young Peckledon, the singer Galyeon of Cuy, and the squires Morros and Jothos Slynt told how Tyrion had picked up the chalice as Joff was dying and poured out the last of the poisoned wine onto the floor.

When did I make so many enemies? Lady Merryweather was all but a stranger. Tyrion wondered if she was blind or bought. At least Galyeon of Cuy had not set his account to music, or else there might have been seventy-seven bloody verses to it.

When his uncle called that night after supper, his manner was cold and distant. *He thinks I did it too.* "Do you have witnesses for us?" Ser Kevan asked him.

"Not as such, no. Unless you've found my wife."

His uncle shook his head. "It would seem the trial is going very badly for you."

"Oh, do you think so? I hadn't noticed." Tyrion fingered his scar. "Varys has not come."

"Nor will he. On the morrow he testifies against you."

Lovely. "I see." He shifted in his seat. "I am curious. You were always a fair man, Uncle. What convinced you?"

"Why steal Pycelle's poisons, if not to use them?" Ser Kevan said bluntly. "And Lady Merryweather saw—"

"—*nothing!* There was nothing to see. But how do I prove that? How do I prove *anything*, penned up here?"

"Perhaps the time has come for you to confess."

Even through the thick stone walls of the Red Keep, Tyrion could hear the steady wash of rain. “Say that again, Uncle? I could swear you urged me to confess.”

“If you were to admit your guilt before the throne and repent of your crime, your father would withhold the sword. You would be permitted to take the black.”

Tyrion laughed in his face. “Those were the same terms Cersei offered Eddard Stark. We all know how *that* ended.”

“Your father had no part in that.”

That much was true, at least. “Castle Black teems with murderers, thieves and rapists,” Tyrion said, “but I don’t recall meeting many regicides while I was there. You expect me to believe that if I admit to being a kinslayer and kingslayer, my father will simply nod, forgive me, and pack me off to the Wall with some warm woolen smallclothes.” He hooted rudely.

“Naught was said of forgiveness,” Ser Kevan said sternly. “A confession would put this matter to rest. It is for that reason your father sends me with this offer.”

“Thank him kindly for me, Uncle,” said Tyrion, “but tell him I am not presently in a confessing mood.”

“Were I you, I’d change my mood. Your sister wants your head, and Lord Tyrell at least is inclined to give it to her.”

“So one of my judges has already condemned me, without hearing a word in my defense?” It was no more than he expected. “Will I still be allowed to speak and present witnesses?”

“You *have* no witnesses,” his uncle reminded him. “Tyrion, if you are guilty of this enormity, the Wall is a kinder fate than you deserve. And if you are blameless . . . there is fighting in the north, I know, but even so it will be a safer place for you than King’s Landing, whatever the outcome of this trial. The mob is convinced of your guilt. Were you so foolish as to venture out into the streets, they would tear you limb from limb.”

“I can see how much that prospect upsets you.”

“You are my brother’s son.”

“You might remind *him* of that.”

“Do you think he would allow you to take the black if you were not his own blood, and Joanna’s? Tywin seems a hard man to you, I know, but he is no harder than he’s had to be. Our own father was gentle and amiable, but so weak his bannermen mocked him in their cups. Some saw fit to defy him openly. Other lords borrowed our gold and never troubled to repay it. At court they japed of toothless lions. Even his mistress stole from him. A woman scarcely one step above a whore, and she helped herself to my mother’s jewels! It fell to Tywin to restore House Lannister to its proper place. Just as it fell to him to rule this realm, when he was no more than twenty. He bore that heavy burden for *twenty years*, and all it earned him was a mad king’s envy. Instead of the honor he deserved, he was made to suffer slights beyond count, yet he gave the Seven Kingdoms peace, plenty, and justice. He is a just man. You would be wise to trust him.”

Tyrion blinked in astonishment. Ser Kevan had always been solid, stolid, pragmatic; he had never heard him speak with such fervor before. “You love him.”

“He is my brother.”

“I . . . I will think on what you’ve said.”

“Think carefully, then. And quickly.”

He thought of little else that night, but come morning was no closer to deciding if his father could be trusted. A servant brought him porridge and honey to break his fast, but all he could taste was bile at the thought of confession. *They will call me kinslayer till the end of my days. For a thousand years or more, if I am remembered at all, it will be as the monstrous dwarf who poisoned his young nephew at his wedding feast.* The thought made him so bloody angry that he flung the bowl and spoon across the room and left a smear of porridge on the wall. Ser Addam Marbrand looked at it curiously when he came to escort Tyrion to trial, but had the good grace not to inquire.

“Lord Varys,” the herald said, “master of whisperers.”

Powdered, primped, and smelling of rosewater, the Spider rubbed his hands one over the other all the time he spoke. *Washing my life away*, Tyrion thought, as he listened to the eunuch’s mournful account of how the Imp had schemed to part Joffrey from the Hound’s protection and spoken

with Bronn of the benefits of having Tommen as king. *Half-truths are worth more than outright lies.* And unlike the others, Varys had documents; parchments painstakingly filled with notes, details, dates, whole conversations. So much material that its recitation took all day, and so much of it damning. Varys confirmed Tyrion's midnight visit to Grand Maester Pycelle's chambers and the theft of his poisons and potions, confirmed the threat he'd made to Cersei the night of their supper, confirmed every bloody thing but the poisoning itself. When Prince Oberyn asked him how he could possibly know all this, not having been present at any of these events, the eunuch only giggled and said, "My little birds told me. Knowing is their purpose, and mine."

How do I question a little bird? thought Tyrion. *I should have had the eunuch's head off my first day in King's Landing. Damn him. And damn me for whatever trust I put in him.*

"Have we heard it all?" Lord Tywin asked his daughter as Varys left the hall.

"Almost," said Cersei. "I beg your leave to bring one final witness before you, on the morrow."

"As you wish," Lord Tywin said.

Oh, good, thought Tyrion savagely. *After this farce of a trial, execution will almost come as a relief.*

That night, as he sat by his window drinking, he heard voices outside his door. *Ser Kevan, come for my answer,* he thought at once, but it was not his uncle who entered.

Tyrion rose to give Prince Oberyn a mocking bow. "Are judges permitted to visit the accused?"

"Princes are permitted to go where they will. Or so I told your guards." The Red Viper took a seat.

"My father will be displeased with you."

"The happiness of Tywin Lannister has never been high on my list of concerns. Is it Dornish wine you're drinking?"

"From the Arbor."

Oberyn made a face. "Red water. Did you poison him?"

“No. Did you?”

The prince smiled. “Do all dwarfs have tongues like yours? Someone is going to cut it out one of these days.”

“You are not the first to tell me that. Perhaps I should cut it out myself, it seems to make no end of trouble.”

“So I’ve seen. I think I may drink some of Lord Redwyne’s grape juice after all.”

“As you like.” Tyrion served him a cup.

The man took a sip, sloshed it about in his mouth, and swallowed. “It will serve, for the moment. I will send you up some strong Dornish wine on the morrow.” He took another sip. “I have turned up that golden-haired whore I was hoping for.”

“So you found Chataya’s?”

“At Chataya’s I bedded the black-skinned girl. Alayaya, I believe she is called. Exquisite, despite the stripes on her back. But the whore I referred to is your sister.”

“Has she seduced you yet?” Tyrion asked, unsurprised.

Oberyn laughed aloud. “No, but she will if I meet her price. The queen has even hinted at marriage. Her Grace needs another husband, and who better than a prince of Dorne? Ellaria believes I should accept. Just the thought of Cersei in our bed makes her wet, the randy wench. And we should not even need to pay the dwarf’s penny. All your sister requires from me is one head, somewhat overlarge and missing a nose.”

“And?” said Tyrion, waiting.

By way of answer Prince Oberyn swirled his wine, and said, “When the Young Dragon conquered Dorne so long ago, he left the Lord of Highgarden to rule us after the Submission of Sunspear. This Tyrell moved with his tail from keep to keep, chasing rebels and making certain that our knees stayed bent. He would arrive in force, take a castle for his own, stay a moon’s turn, and ride on to the next castle. It was his custom to turn the lords out of their own chambers and take their beds for himself. One night he found himself beneath a heavy velvet canopy. A sash hung down near the pillows, should he wish to summon a wench. He had a taste for Dornish

women, this Lord Tyrell, and who can blame him? So he pulled upon the sash, and when he did the canopy above him split open, and a hundred red scorpions fell down upon his head. His death lit a fire that soon swept across Dorne, undoing all the Young Dragon's victories in a fortnight. The kneeling men stood up, and we were free again."

"I know the tale," said Tyrion. "What of it?"

"Just this. If I should ever find a sash beside my own bed, and pull on it, I would sooner have the scorpions fall upon me than the queen in all her naked beauty."

Tyrion grinned. "We have that much in common, then."

"To be sure, I have much to thank your sister for. If not for her accusation at the feast, it might well be you judging me instead of me judging you." The prince's eyes were dark with amusement. "Who knows more of poison than the Red Viper of Dorne, after all? Who has better reason to want to keep the Tyrells far from the crown? And with Joffrey in his grave, by *Dornish* law the Iron Throne should pass next to his sister Myrcella, who as it happens is betrothed to mine own nephew, thanks to you."

"Dornish law does not apply." Tyrion had been so ensnared in his own troubles that he'd never stopped to consider the succession. "My father will crown Tommen, count on that."

"He may indeed crown Tommen, here in King's Landing. Which is not to say that my brother may not crown Myrcella, down in Sunspear. Will your father make war on your niece on behalf of your nephew? Will your sister?" He gave a shrug. "Perhaps I should marry Queen Cersei after all, on the condition that she support her daughter over her son. Do you think she would?"

Never, Tyrion wanted to say, but the word caught in his throat. Cersei always resented being excluded from power on account of her sex. *If Dornish law applied in the west, she would be the heir to Casterly Rock in her own right.* She and Jaime were twins, but Cersei had come first into the world, and that was all it took. By championing Myrcella's cause she would be championing her own. "I do not know how my sister would choose, between Tommen and Myrcella," he admitted. "It makes no matter. My father will never give her that choice."

“Your father,” said Prince Oberyne, “may not live forever.”

Something about the way he said it made the hairs on the back of Tyrion’s neck bristle. Suddenly he was mindful of Elia again, and all that Oberyne had said as they crossed the field of ashes. *He wants the head that spoke the words, not just the hand that swung the sword.* “It is not wise to speak such treasons in the Red Keep, my prince. The little birds are listening.”

“Let them. Is it treason to say a man is mortal? *Valar morghulis* was how they said it in Valyria of old. *All men must die.* And the Doom came and proved it true.” The Dornishman went to the window to gaze out into the night. “It is being said that you have no witnesses for us.”

“I was hoping one look at this sweet face of mine would be enough to persuade you all of my innocence.”

“You are mistaken, my lord. The Fat Flower of Highgarden is quite convinced of your guilt, and determined to see you die. His precious Margaery was drinking from that chalice too, as he has reminded us half a hundred times.”

“And you?” said Tyrion.

“Men are seldom as they appear. You look so very guilty that I am convinced of your innocence. Still, you will likely be condemned. Justice is in short supply this side of the mountains. There has been none for Elia, Aegon, or Rhaenys. Why should there be any for you? Perhaps Joffrey’s real killer was eaten by a bear. That seems to happen quite often in King’s Landing. Oh, wait, the bear was at Harrenhal, now I remember.”

“Is that the game we are playing?” Tyrion rubbed at his scarred nose. He had nothing to lose by telling Oberyne the truth. “There *was* a bear at Harrenhal, and it did kill Ser Amory Lorch.”

“How sad for him,” said the Red Viper. “And for you. Do all noseless men lie so badly, I wonder?”

“I am not lying. Ser Amory dragged Princess Rhaenys out from under her father’s bed and stabbed her to death. He had some men-at-arms with him, but I do not know their names.” He leaned forward. “It was Ser Gregor

Clegane who smashed Prince Aegon's head against a wall and raped your sister Elia with his blood and brains still on his hands."

"What is this, now? Truth, from a Lannister?" Oberyne smiled coldly. "Your father gave the commands, yes?"

"No." He spoke the lie without hesitation, and never stopped to ask himself why he should.

The Dornishman raised one thin black eyebrow. "Such a dutiful son. And such a very feeble lie. It was Lord Tywin who presented my sister's children to King Robert all wrapped up in crimson Lannister cloaks."

"Perhaps you ought to have this discussion with my father. He was there. I was at the Rock, and still so young that I thought the thing between my legs was only good for pissing."

"Yes, but you are here now, and in some difficulty, I would say. Your innocence may be as plain as the scar on your face, but it will not save you. No more than your father will." The Dornish prince smiled. "But I might."

"You?" Tyrion studied him. "You are one judge in three. How could you save me?"

"Not as your judge. As your champion."