



TYRION

Tyrion dressed himself in darkness, listening to his wife's soft breathing from the bed they shared. *She dreams*, he thought, when Sansa murmured something softly—a name, perhaps, though it was too faint to say—and turned onto her side. As man and wife they shared a marriage bed, but that was all. *Even her tears she hoards to herself*.

He had expected anguish and anger when he told her of her brother's death, but Sansa's face had remained so still that for a moment he feared she had not understood. It was only later, with a heavy oaken door between them, that he heard her sobbing. Tyrion had considered going to her then, to offer what comfort he could. *No*, he had to remind himself, *she will not look for solace from a Lannister*. The most he could do was to shield her from the uglier details of the Red Wedding as they came down from the Twins. Sansa did not need to hear how her brother's body had been hacked and mutilated, he decided; nor how her mother's corpse had been dumped naked into the Green Fork in a savage mockery of House Tully's funeral customs. The last thing the girl needed was more fodder for her nightmares.

It was not enough, though. He had wrapped his cloak around her shoulders and sworn to protect her, but that was as cruel a jape as the crown the Freys had placed atop the head of Robb Stark's direwolf after they'd sewn it onto his headless corpse. Sansa knew that as well. The way she looked at him, her stiffness when she climbed into their bed . . . when he

was with her, never for an instant could he forget who he was, or *what* he was. No more than she did. She still went nightly to the godswood to pray, and Tyrion wondered if she were praying for his death. She had lost her home, her place in the world, and everyone she had ever loved or trusted. *Winter is coming*, warned the Stark words, and truly it had come for them with a vengeance. *But it is high summer for House Lannister. So why am I so bloody cold?*

He pulled on his boots, fastened his cloak with a lion's head brooch, and slipped out into the torchlit hall. There was this much to be said for his marriage; it had allowed him to escape Maegor's Holdfast. Now that he had a wife and household, his lord father had agreed that more suitable accommodations were required, and Lord Gyles had found himself abruptly dispossessed of his spacious apartments atop the Kitchen Keep. And splendid apartments they were too, with a large bedchamber and adequate solar, a bath and dressing room for his wife, and small adjoining chambers for Pod and Sansa's maids. Even Bronn's cell by the stair had a window of sorts. *Well, more an arrow slit, but it lets in light.* The castle's main kitchen was just across the courtyard, true, but Tyrion found those sounds and smells infinitely preferable to sharing Maegor's with his sister. The less he had to see of Cersei the happier he was like to be.

Tyrion could hear Brella's snoring as he passed her cell. Shae complained of that, but it seemed a small enough price to pay. Varys had suggested the woman to him; in former days, she had run Lord Renly's household in the city, which had given her a deal of practice at being blind, deaf, and mute.

Lighting a taper, he made his way back to the servants' steps and descended. The floors below his own were still, and he heard no footsteps but his own. Down he went, to the ground floor and beyond, to emerge in a gloomy cellar with a vaulted stone ceiling. Much of the castle was connected underground, and the Kitchen Keep was no exception. Tyrion waddled along a long dark passageway until he found the door he wanted, and pushed through.

Within, the dragon skulls were waiting, and so was Shae. "I thought m'lord had forgotten me." Her dress was draped over a black tooth near as tall as she was, and she stood within the dragon's jaws, nude. *Balerion*, he thought. Or was it Vhagar? One dragon skull looked much like another.

Just the sight of her made him hard. “Come out of there.”

“I won’t.” She smiled her wickedest smile. “M’lord will pluck me from the dragon’s jaws, I know.” But when he waddled closer she leaned forward and blew out the taper.

“Shae . . .” He reached, but she spun and slipped free.

“You have to catch me.” Her voice came from his left. “M’lord must have played monsters and maidens when he was little.”

“Are you calling me a monster?”

“No more than I’m a maiden.” She was behind him, her steps soft against the floor. “You need to catch me all the same.”

He did, finally, but only because she let herself be caught. By the time she slipped into his arms, he was flushed and out of breath from stumbling into dragon skulls. All that was forgotten in an instant when he felt her small breasts pressed against his face in the dark, her stiff little nipples brushing lightly over his lips and the scar where his nose had been. Tyrion pulled her down onto the floor. “My giant,” she breathed as he entered her. “My giant’s come to save me.”

After, as they lay entwined amongst the dragon skulls, he rested his head against her, inhaling the smooth clean smell of her hair. “We should go back,” he said reluctantly. “It must be near dawn. Sansa will be waking.”

“You should give her dreamwine,” Shae said, “like Lady Tanda does with Lollys. A cup before she goes to sleep, and we could fuck in bed beside her without her waking.” She giggled. “Maybe we should, some night. Would m’lord like that?” Her hand found his shoulder, and began to knead the muscles there. “Your neck is hard as stone. What troubles you?”

Tyrion could not see his fingers in front of his face, but he ticked his woes off on them all the same. “My wife. My sister. My nephew. My father. The Tyrells.” He had to move to his other hand. “Varys. Pycelle. Littlefinger. The Red Viper of Dorne.” He had come to his last finger. “The face that stares back out of the water when I wash.”

Shae kissed his maimed scarred nose. “A brave face. A kind and good face. I wish I could see it now.”

All the sweet innocence of the world was in her voice. *Innocence? Fool, she's a whore, all she knows of men is the bit between their legs. Fool, fool.* "Better you than me." Tyrion sat. "We have a long day before us, both of us. You shouldn't have blown out that taper. How are we to find our clothing?"

She laughed. "Maybe we'll have to go naked."

And if we're seen, my lord father will hang you. Hiring Shae as one of Sansa's maids had given him an excuse to be seen talking with her, but Tyrion did not delude himself that they were safe. Varys had warned him. "I gave Shae a false history, but it was meant for Lollys and Lady Tanda. Your sister is of a more suspicious mind. If she should ask me what I know . . ."

"You will tell her some clever lie."

"No. I will tell her that the girl is a common camp follower that you acquired before the battle on the Green Fork and brought to King's Landing against your lord father's express command. I will not lie to the queen."

"You have lied to her before. Shall I tell her that?"

The eunuch sighed. "That cuts more deeply than a knife, my lord. I have served you loyally, but I must also serve your sister when I can. How long do you think she would let me live if I were of no further use to her whatsoever? I have no fierce sellsword to protect me, no valiant brother to avenge me, only some little birds who whisper in my ear. With those whisperings I must buy my life anew each day."

"Pardon me if I do not weep for you."

"I shall, but you must pardon me if I do not weep for Shae. I confess, I do not understand what there is in her to make a clever man like you act such a fool."

"You might, if you were not a eunuch."

"Is that the way of it? A man may have wits, or a bit of meat between his legs, but not both?" Varys chuckled. "Perhaps I should be grateful I was cut, then."

The Spider was right. Tyrion groped through the dragon-haunted darkness for his smallclothes, feeling wretched. The risk he was taking left him tight as a drumhead, and there was guilt as well. *The Others can take my guilt,* he thought as he slipped his tunic over his head. *Why should I be*

guilty? My wife wants no part of me, and most especially not the part that seems to want her. Perhaps he ought to *tell* her about Shae. It was not as though he was the first man ever to keep a concubine. Sansa's own oh-so-honorable father had given her a bastard brother. For all he knew, his wife might be thrilled to learn that he was fucking Shae, so long as it spared her his unwelcome touch.

No, I dare not. Vows or no, his wife could not be trusted. She might be maiden between the legs, but she was hardly innocent of betrayal; she had once spilled her own father's plans to Cersei. And girls her age were not known for keeping secrets.

The only safe course was to rid himself of Shae. *I might send her to Chataya*, Tyrion reflected, reluctantly. In Chataya's brothel, Shae would have all the silks and gems she could wish for, and the gentlest highborn patrons. It would be a better life by far than the one she had been living when he'd found her.

Or, if she was tired of earning her bread on her back, he might arrange a marriage for her. *Bronn, perhaps?* The sellsword had never balked at eating off his master's plate, and he was a knight now, a better match than she could otherwise hope for. *Or Ser Tallad?* Tyrion had noticed that one gazing wistfully at Shae more than once. *Why not? He's tall, strong, not hard to look upon, every inch the gifted young knight.* Of course, Tallad knew Shae only as a pretty young lady's maid in service at the castle. *If he wed her and then learned she was a whore . . .*

"M'lord, where are you? Did the dragons eat you up?"

"No. Here." He groped at a dragon skull. "I have found a shoe, but I believe it's yours."

"M'lord sounds very solemn. Have I displeased you?"

"No," he said, too curtly. "You always please me." *And therein is our danger.* He might dream of sending her away at times like this, but that never lasted long. Tyrion saw her dimly through the gloom, pulling a woolen sock up a slender leg. *I can see.* A vague light was leaking through the row of long narrow windows set high in the cellar wall. The skulls of the Targaryen dragons were emerging from the darkness around them, black amidst grey. "Day comes too soon." A new day. A new year. A new

century. *I survived the Green Fork and the Blackwater, I can bloody well survive King Joffrey's wedding.*

Shae snatched her dress down off the dragon's tooth and slipped it over her head. "I'll go up first. Brella will want help with the bathwater." She bent over to give him one last kiss, upon the brow. "My giant of Lannister. I love you so."

And I love you as well, sweetling. A whore she might well be, but she deserved better than what he had to give her. I will wed her to Ser Tallad. He seems a decent man. And tall . . .