



TYRION

They supped alone, as they did so often.

“The pease are overcooked,” his wife ventured once.

“No matter,” he said. “So is the mutton.”

It was a jest, but Sansa took it for criticism. “I am sorry, my lord.”

“Why? Some cook should be sorry. Not you. The pease are not your province, Sansa.”

“I . . . I am sorry that my lord husband is displeased.”

“Any displeasure I’m feeling has naught to do with pease. I have Joffrey and my sister to displease me, and my lord father, and three hundred bloody Dornishmen.” He had settled Prince Oberyn and his lords in a cornerfort facing the city, as far from the Tyrells as he could put them without evicting them from the Red Keep entirely. It was not nearly far enough. Already there had been a brawl in a Flea Bottom pot-shop that left one Tyrell man-at-arms dead and two of Lord Gargalen’s scalded, and an ugly confrontation in the yard when Mace Tyrell’s wizened little mother called Ellaria Sand “the serpent’s whore.” Every time he chanced to see Oberyn Martell the prince asked when the justice would be served. Overcooked pease were the least of Tyrion’s troubles, but he saw no point in burdening his young wife with any of that. Sansa had enough griefs of her own.

“The pease suffice,” he told her curtly. “They are green and round, what more can one expect of pease? Here, I’ll have another serving, if it please my lady.” He beckoned, and Podrick Payne spooned so many pease onto his plate that Tyrion lost sight of his mutton. *That was stupid*, he told himself. *Now I have to eat them all, or she’ll be sorry all over again.*

The supper ended in a strained silence, as so many of their suppers did. Afterward, as Pod was removing the cups and platters, Sansa asked Tyrion for leave to visit the godswood.

“As you wish.” He had become accustomed to his wife’s nightly devotions. She prayed at the royal sept as well, and often lit candles to Mother, Maid, and Crone. Tyrion found all this piety excessive, if truth be told, but in her place he might want the help of the gods as well. “I confess, I know little of the old gods,” he said, trying to be pleasant. “Perhaps someday you might enlighten me. I could even accompany you.”

“No,” Sansa said at once. “You . . . you are kind to offer, but . . . there are no *devotions*, my lord. No priests or songs or candles. Only trees, and silent prayer. You would be bored.”

“No doubt you’re right.” *She knows me better than I thought.* “Though the sound of rustling leaves might be a pleasant change from some septon droning on about the seven aspects of grace.” Tyrion waved her off. “I won’t intrude. Dress warmly, my lady, the wind is brisk out there.” He was tempted to ask what she prayed for, but Sansa was so dutiful she might actually tell him, and he didn’t think he wanted to know.

He went back to work after she left, trying to track some golden dragons through the labyrinth of Littlefinger’s ledgers. Petyr Baelish had not believed in letting gold sit about and grow dusty, that was for certain, but the more Tyrion tried to make sense of his accounts the more his head hurt. It was all very well to talk of breeding dragons instead of locking them up in the treasury, but some of these ventures smelled worse than week-old fish. *I wouldn’t have been so quick to let Joffrey fling the Antler Men over the walls if I’d known how many of the bloody bastards had taken loans from the crown.* He would have to send Bronn to find their heirs, but he feared that would prove as fruitful as trying to squeeze silver from a silverfish.

When the summons from his lord father arrived, it was the first time Tyrion could ever recall being pleased to see Ser Boros Blount. He closed the ledgers gratefully, blew out the oil lamp, tied a cloak around his shoulders, and waddled across the castle to the Tower of the Hand. The wind *was* brisk, just as he'd warned Sansa, and there was a smell of rain in the air. Perhaps when Lord Tywin was done with him he should go to the godswood and fetch her home before she got soaked.

But all that went straight out of his head when he entered the Hand's solar to find Cersei, Ser Kevan, and Grand Maester Pycelle gathered about Lord Tywin and the king. Joffrey was almost bouncing, and Cersei was savoring a smug little smile, though Lord Tywin looked as grim as ever. *I wonder if he could smile even if he wanted to.* "What's happened?" Tyrion asked.

His father offered him a roll of parchment. Someone had flattened it, but it still wanted to curl. "*Roslin caught a fine fat trout,*" the message read. "*Her brothers gave her a pair of wolf pelts for her wedding.*" Tyrion turned it over to inspect the broken seal. The wax was silvery-grey, and pressed into it were the twin towers of House Frey. "Does the Lord of the Crossing imagine he's being poetic? Or is this meant to confound us?" Tyrion snorted. "The trout would be Edmure Tully, the pelts . . ."

"He's *dead!*" Joffrey sounded so proud and happy you might have thought he'd skinned Robb Stark himself.

First Greyjoy and now Stark. Tyrion thought of his child wife, praying in the godswood even now. *Praying to her father's gods to bring her brother victory and keep her mother safe, no doubt.* The old gods paid no more heed to prayer than the new ones, it would seem. Perhaps he should take comfort in that. "Kings are falling like leaves this autumn," he said. "It would seem our little war is winning itself."

"Wars do not win themselves, Tyrion," Cersei said with poisonous sweetness. "Our lord father won this war."

"Nothing is won so long as we have enemies in the field," Lord Tywin warned them.

"The river lords are no fools," the queen argued. "Without the northmen they cannot hope to stand against the combined power of Highgarden,

Casterly Rock, and Dorne. Surely they will choose submission rather than destruction.”

“Most,” agreed Lord Tywin. “Riverrun remains, but so long as Walder Frey holds Edmure Tully hostage, the Blackfish dare not mount a threat. Jason Mallister and Tytos Blackwood will fight on for honor’s sake, but the Freys can keep the Mallisters penned up at Seagard, and with the right inducement Jonos Bracken can be persuaded to change his allegiance and attack the Blackwoods. In the end they will bend the knee, yes. I mean to offer generous terms. Any castle that yields to us will be spared, save one.”

“Harrenhal?” said Tyrion, who knew his sire.

“The realm is best rid of these Brave Companions. I have commanded Ser Gregor to put the castle to the sword.”

Gregor Clegane. It appeared as if his lord father meant to mine the Mountain for every last nugget of ore before turning him over to Dornish justice. The Brave Companions would end as heads on spikes, and Littlefinger would stroll into Harrenhal without so much as a spot of blood on those fine clothes of his. He wondered if Petyr Baelish had reached the Vale yet. *If the gods are good, he ran into a storm at sea and sank.* But when had the gods ever been especially good?

“They should all be put to the sword,” Joffrey declared suddenly. “The Mallisters and Blackwoods and Brackens . . . all of them. They’re traitors. I want them killed, Grandfather. I won’t have any *generous terms*.” The king turned to Grand Maester Pycelle. “And I want Robb Stark’s head too. Write to Lord Frey and tell him. The king commands. I’m going to have it served to Sansa at my wedding feast.”

“Sire,” Ser Kevan said, in a shocked voice, “the lady is now your aunt by marriage.”

“A jest.” Cersei smiled. “Joff did not mean it.”

“Yes I did,” Joffrey insisted. “He was a traitor, and I want his stupid head. I’m going to make Sansa kiss it.”

“*No.*” Tyrion’s voice was hoarse. “Sansa is no longer yours to torment. Understand that, monster.”

Joffrey sneered. “You’re the monster, Uncle.”

“Am I?” Tyrion cocked his head. “Perhaps you should speak more softly to me, then. Monsters are dangerous beasts, and just now kings seem to be dying like flies.”

“I could have your tongue out for saying that,” the boy king said, reddening. “I’m the king.”

Cersei put a protective hand on her son’s shoulder. “Let the dwarf make all the threats he likes, Joff. I want my lord father and my uncle to see what he is.”

Lord Tywin ignored that; it was Joffrey he addressed. “Aerys also felt the need to remind men that he was king. And he was passing fond of ripping tongues out as well. You could ask Ser Ilyn Payne about that, though you’ll get no reply.”

“Ser Ilyn never dared provoke Aerys the way your Imp provokes Joff,” said Cersei. “You heard him. ‘Monster,’ he said. To the King’s Grace. And he threatened him . . .”

“Be quiet, Cersei. Joffrey, when your enemies defy you, you must serve them steel and fire. When they go to their knees, however, you must help them back to their feet. Elsewise no man will ever bend the knee to you. And any man who must say ‘I am the king’ is no true king at all. Aerys never understood that, but you will. When I’ve won your war for you, we will restore the king’s peace and the king’s justice. The only head that need concern you is Margaery Tyrell’s maidenhead.”

Joffrey had that sullen, sulky look he got. Cersei had him firmly by the shoulder, but perhaps she should have had him by the throat. The boy surprised them all. Instead of scuttling safely back under his rock, Joff drew himself up defiantly and said, “You talk about Aerys, Grandfather, but you were scared of him.”

Oh, my, hasn’t this gotten interesting? Tyrion thought.

Lord Tywin studied his grandchild in silence, gold flecks shining in his pale green eyes. “Joffrey, apologize to your grandfather,” said Cersei.

He wrenched free of her. “Why should I? Everyone knows it’s true. My father won all the battles. He killed Prince Rhaegar and took the crown,

while *your* father was hiding under Casterly Rock.” The boy gave his grandfather a defiant look. “A *strong* king acts boldly, he doesn’t just talk.”

“Thank you for that wisdom, Your Grace,” Lord Tywin said, with a courtesy so cold it was like to freeze their ears off. “Ser Kevan, I can see the king is tired. Please see him safely back to his bedchamber. Pycelle, perhaps some gentle potion to help His Grace sleep restfully?”

“Dreamwine, my lord?”

“I don’t want any dreamwine,” Joffrey insisted.

Lord Tywin would have paid more heed to a mouse squeaking in the corner. “Dreamwine will serve. Cersei, Tyrion, remain.”

Ser Kevan took Joffrey firmly by the arm and marched him out the door, where two of the Kingsguard were waiting. Grand Maester Pycelle scurried after them as fast as his shaky old legs could take him. Tyrion remained where he was.

“Father, I am sorry,” Cersei said, when the door was shut. “Joff has always been willful, I did warn you . . .”

“There is a long league’s worth of difference between willful and stupid. ‘A strong king acts boldly?’ Who told him that?”

“Not me, I promise you,” said Cersei. “Most like it was something he heard Robert say . . .”

“The part about you hiding under Casterly Rock does sound like Robert.” Tyrion didn’t want Lord Tywin forgetting that bit.

“Yes, I recall now,” Cersei said, “Robert *often* told Joff that a king must be bold.”

“And what were *you* telling him, pray? I did not fight a war to seat Robert the Second on the Iron Throne. You gave me to understand the boy cared nothing for his father.”

“Why would he? Robert ignored him. He would have *beat* him if I’d allowed it. That brute you made me marry once hit the boy so hard he knocked out two of his baby teeth, over some mischief with a cat. I told him I’d kill him in his sleep if he ever did it again, and he never did, but sometimes he would say things . . .”

“It appears things needed to be said.” Lord Tywin waved two fingers at her, a brusque dismissal. “Go.”

She went, seething.

“Not Robert the Second,” Tyrion said. “Aerys the Third.”

“The boy is thirteen. There is time yet.” Lord Tywin paced to the window. That was unlike him; he was more upset than he wished to show. “He requires a sharp lesson.”

Tyrion had gotten his own sharp lesson at thirteen. He felt almost sorry for his nephew. On the other hand, no one deserved it more. “Enough of Joffrey,” he said. “Wars are won with quills and ravens, wasn’t that what you said? I must congratulate you. How long have you and Walder Frey been plotting this?”

“I mislike that word,” Lord Tywin said stiffly.

“And I mislike being left in the dark.”

“There was no reason to tell you. You had no part in this.”

“Was Cersei told?” Tyrion demanded to know.

“No one was told, save those who had a part to play. And they were only told as much as they needed to know. You ought to know that there is no other way to keep a secret—here, especially. My object was to rid us of a dangerous enemy as cheaply as I could, not to indulge your curiosity or make your sister feel important.” He closed the shutters, frowning. “You have a certain cunning, Tyrion, but the plain truth is *you talk too much*. That loose tongue of yours will be your undoing.”

“You should have let Joff tear it out,” suggested Tyrion.

“You would do well not to tempt me,” Lord Tywin said. “I’ll hear no more of this. I have been considering how best to appease Oberyn Martell and his entourage.”

“Oh? Is this something I’m allowed to know, or should I leave so you can discuss it with yourself?”

His father ignored the sally. “Prince Oberyn’s presence here is unfortunate. His brother is a cautious man, a *reasoned* man, subtle, deliberate, even indolent to a degree. He is a man who weighs the

consequences of every word and every action. But Oberyn has always been half-mad.”

“Is it true he tried to raise Dorne for Viserys?”

“No one speaks of it, but yes. Ravens flew and riders rode, with what secret messages I never knew. Jon Arryn sailed to Sunspear to return Prince Lewyn’s bones, sat down with Prince Doran, and ended all the talk of war. But Robert never went to Dorne thereafter, and Prince Oberyn seldom left it.”

“Well, he’s here now, with half the nobility of Dorne in his tail, and he grows more impatient every day,” said Tyrion. “Perhaps I should show him the brothels of King’s Landing, that might distract him. A tool for every task, isn’t that how it works? My tool is yours, Father. Never let it be said that House Lannister blew its trumpets and I did not respond.”

Lord Tywin’s mouth tightened. “Very droll. Shall I have them sew you a suit of motley, and a little hat with bells on it?”

“If I wear it, do I have leave to say anything I want about His Grace King Joffrey?”

Lord Tywin seated himself again and said, “I was made to suffer my father’s follies. I will not suffer yours. Enough.”

“Very well, as you ask so pleasantly. The Red Viper is *not* going to be pleasant, I fear . . . nor will he content himself with Ser Gregor’s head alone.”

“All the more reason not to give it to him.”

“*Not* to . . . ?” Tyrion was shocked. “I thought we were agreed that the woods were full of beasts.”

“Lesser beasts.” Lord Tywin’s fingers laced together under his chin. “Ser Gregor has served us well. No other knight in the realm inspires such terror in our enemies.”

“Oberyn *knows* that Gregor was the one who . . .”

“He knows nothing. He has heard tales. Stable gossip and kitchen calumnies. He has no crumb of proof. Ser Gregor is certainly not about to confess to him. I mean to keep him well away for so long as the Dornishmen are in King’s Landing.”

“And when Oberyn demands the justice he’s come for?”

“I will tell him that Ser Amory Lorch killed Elia and her children,” Lord Tywin said calmly. “So will you, if he asks.”

“Ser Amory Lorch is dead,” Tyrion said flatly.

“Precisely. Vargo Hoat had Ser Amory torn apart by a bear after the fall of Harrenhal. That ought to be sufficiently grisly to appease even Oberyn Martell.”

“You may call that justice . . .”

“It *is* justice. It was Ser Amory who brought me the girl’s body, if you must know. He found her hiding under her father’s bed, as if she believed Rhaegar could still protect her. Princess Elia and the babe were in the nursery a floor below.”

“Well, it’s a tale, and Ser Amory’s not like to deny it. What will you tell Oberyn when he asks who gave Lorch his orders?”

“Ser Amory acted on his own in the hope of winning favor from the new king. Robert’s hatred for Rhaegar was scarcely a secret.”

It might serve, Tyrion had to concede, *but the snake will not be happy*. “Far be it from me to question your cunning, Father, but in your place I do believe I’d have let Robert Baratheon bloody his own hands.”

Lord Tywin stared at him as if he had lost his wits. “You deserve that motley, then. We had come late to Robert’s cause. It was necessary to demonstrate our loyalty. When I laid those bodies before the throne, no man could doubt that we had forsaken House Targaryen forever. And Robert’s relief was palpable. As stupid as he was, even he knew that Rhaegar’s children had to die if his throne was ever to be secure. Yet he saw himself as a hero, and heroes do not kill children.” His father shrugged. “I grant you, it was done too brutally. Elia need not have been harmed at all, that was sheer folly. By herself she was nothing.”

“Then why did the Mountain kill her?”

“Because I did not tell him to spare her. I doubt I mentioned her at all. I had more pressing concerns. Ned Stark’s van was rushing south from the Trident, and I feared it might come to swords between us. And it was in Aerys to murder Jaime, with no more cause than spite. That was the thing I

feared most. That, and what Jaime himself might do.” He closed a fist. “Nor did I yet grasp what I had in Gregor Clegane, only that he was huge and terrible in battle. The rape . . . even you will not accuse me of giving *that* command, I would hope. Ser Amory was almost as bestial with Rhaenys. I asked him afterward why it had required half a hundred thrusts to kill a girl of . . . two? Three? He said she’d kicked him and would not stop screaming. If Lorch had half the wits the gods gave a turnip, he would have calmed her with a few sweet words and used a soft silk pillow.” His mouth twisted in distaste. “The blood was in him.”

But not in you, Father. There is no blood in Tywin Lannister. “Was it a soft silk pillow that slew Robb Stark?”

“It was to be an arrow, at Edmure Tully’s wedding feast. The boy was too wary in the field. He kept his men in good order, and surrounded himself with outriders and bodyguards.”

“So Lord Walder slew him under his own roof, at his own table?” Tyrion made a fist. “What of Lady Catelyn?”

“Slain as well, I’d say. *A pair of wolfskins.* Frey had intended to keep her captive, but perhaps something went awry.”

“So much for guest right.”

“The blood is on Walder Frey’s hands, not mine.”

“Walder Frey is a peevish old man who lives to fondle his young wife and brood over all the slights he’s suffered. I have no doubt he hatched this ugly chicken, but he would never have dared such a thing without a promise of protection.”

“I suppose you would have spared the boy and told Lord Frey you had no need of his allegiance? That would have driven the old fool right back into Stark’s arms and won you another year of war. Explain to me why it is more noble to kill ten thousand men in battle than a dozen at dinner.” When Tyrion had no reply to that, his father continued. “The price was cheap by any measure. The crown shall grant Riverrun to Ser Emmon Frey once the Blackfish yields. Lancel and Daven must marry Frey girls, Joy is to wed one of Lord Walder’s natural sons when she’s old enough, and Roose Bolton becomes Warden of the North and takes home Arya Stark.”

“*Arya Stark?*” Tyrion cocked his head. “And Bolton? I might have known Frey would not have the stomach to act alone. But Arya . . . Varys and Ser Jacelyn searched for her for more than half a year. Arya Stark is surely dead.”

“So was Renly, until the Blackwater.”

“What does that mean?”

“Perhaps Littlefinger succeeded where you and Varys failed. Lord Bolton will wed the girl to his bastard son. We shall allow the Dreadfort to fight the ironborn for a few years, and see if he can bring Stark’s other bannermen to heel. Come spring, all of them should be at the end of their strength and ready to bend the knee. The north will go to your son by Sansa Stark . . . if you ever find enough manhood in you to breed one. Lest you forget, it is not only Joffrey who must needs take a maidenhead.”

I had not forgotten, though I’d hoped you had. “And when do you imagine Sansa will be at her most fertile?” Tyrion asked his father in tones that dripped acid. “Before or after I tell her how we murdered her mother and her brother?”