

woven into an elaborate braid, fell across her left shoulder. The taller throne beside her was empty; no doubt the little Lord of the Eyrie was off shaking in his sleep. Tyrion was thankful for that much, at least.

He bowed deeply and took a moment to glance around the hall. Lady Arryn had summoned her knights and retainers to hear his confession, as he had hoped. He saw Ser Brynden Tully's craggy face and Lord Nestor Royce's bluff one. Beside Nestor stood a younger man with fierce black side-whiskers who could only be his heir, Ser Albar. Most of the principal houses of the Vale were represented. Tyrion noted Ser Lyn Corbray, slender as a sword, Lord Hunter with his gouty legs, the widowed Lady Waynwood surrounded by her sons. Others sported sigils he did not know; broken lance, green viper, burning tower, winged chalice.

Among the lords of the Vale were several of his companions from the high road; Ser Rodrik Cassel, pale from half-healed wounds, stood with Ser Willis Wode beside him. Marillion the singer had found a new woodharp. Tyrion smiled; whatever happened here tonight, he did not wish it to happen in secret, and there was no one like a singer for spreading a story near and far. In the rear of the hall, Bronn lounged beneath a pillar. The freerider's black eyes were fixed on Tyrion, and his hand lay lightly on the pommel of his sword. Tyrion gave him a long look, wondering...

Catelyn Stark spoke first. "You wish to confess your crimes, we are told."

"I do, my lady," Tyrion answered.

Lysa Arryn smiled at her sister. "The sky cells always break them. The gods can see them there, and there is no darkness to hide in."

"He does not look broken to me," Lady Catelyn said.

Lady Lysa paid her no mind. "Say what you will," she commanded Tyrion.

And now to roll the dice, he thought with another quick glance back at Bronn. "Where to begin? I am a vile little man, I confess it. My crimes and sins are beyond counting, my lords and ladies. I have lain with whores, not once but hundreds of times. I have wished my own lord father dead, and my sister, our gracious queen, as well." Behind him, someone chuckled. "I have not always treated my servants with kindness. I have gambled. I have even cheated, I blush to admit. I have said many cruel and malicious things about the noble lords and ladies of the court." That drew outright laughter. "Once I—"

"Silence!" Lysa Arryn's pale round face had turned a burning pink. "What do you imagine you are doing, dwarf?"

Tyrion cocked his head to one side. "Why, confessing my crimes, my lady—"

Catelyn Stark took a step forward. "You are accused of sending a hired knife to slay my son Bran in his bed, and of conspiring to murder Lord Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King."

Tyrion gave a helpless shrug. "Those crimes I cannot confess, I fear. I know nothing of any murders."

Lady Lysa rose from her weirwood throne. "I will not be made mock of. You have had your little jape, Imp. I trust you enjoyed it. Ser Vardis, take him back to the dungeon... but this time find him a smaller cell, with a floor more sharply sloped."