

“His back is broken, little one,” Tyrion told her. “The fall shattered his legs as well. They keep him alive with honey and water, or he would starve to death. Perhaps, if he wakes, he will be able to eat real food, but he will never walk again.”

“If he wakes,” Cersei repeated. “Is that likely?”

“The gods alone know,” Tyrion told her. “The maester only hopes.” He chewed some more bread. “I would swear that wolf of his is keeping the boy alive. The creature is outside his window day and night, howling. Every time they chase it away, it returns. The maester said they closed the window once, to shut out the noise, and Bran seemed to weaken. When they opened it again, his heart beat stronger.”

The queen shuddered. “There is something unnatural about those animals,” she said. “They are dangerous. I will not have any of them coming south with us.”

Jaime said, “You’ll have a hard time stopping them, sister. They follow those girls everywhere.”

Tyrion started on his fish. “Are you leaving soon, then?”

“Not near soon enough,” Cersei said. Then she frowned. “Are we leaving?” she echoed. “What about you? Gods, don’t tell me you are staying here?”

Tyrion shrugged. “Benjen Stark is returning to the Night’s Watch with his brother’s bastard. I have a mind to go with them and see this Wall we have all heard so much of.”

Jaime smiled. “I hope you’re not thinking of taking the black on us, sweet brother.”

Tyrion laughed. “What, me, celibate? The whores would go begging from Dorne to Casterly Rock. No, I just want to stand on top of the Wall and piss off the edge of the world.”

Cersei stood abruptly. “The children don’t need to hear this filth. Tommen, Myrcella, come.” She strode briskly from the morning room, her train and her pups trailing behind her.

Jaime Lannister regarded his brother thoughtfully with those cool green eyes. “Stark will never consent to leave Winterfell with his son lingering in the shadow of death.”

“He will if Robert commands it,” Tyrion said. “And Robert will command it. There is nothing Lord Eddard can do for the boy in any case.”

“He could end his torment,” Jaime said. “I would, if it were my son. It would be a mercy.”

“I advise against putting that suggestion to Lord Eddard, sweet brother,” Tyrion said. “He would not take it kindly.”

“Even if the boy does live, he will be a cripple. Worse than a cripple. A grotesque. Give me a good clean death.”

Tyrion replied with a shrug that accentuated the twist of his shoulders. “Speaking for the grotesques,” he said, “I beg to differ. Death is so terribly final, while life is full of possibilities.”

Jaime smiled. “You are a perverse little imp, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” Tyrion admitted. “I hope the boy does wake. I would be most interested to hear what he might have to say.”

His brother’s smile curdled like sour milk. “Tyrion, my sweet brother,” he said darkly, “there are times when you give me cause to wonder whose side you are on.”