

CERSEI

A cold rain was falling, turning the walls and ramparts of the Red Keep dark as blood. The queen held the king's hand and led him firmly across the muddy yard to where her litter waited with its escort. "Uncle Jaime said I could ride my horse and throw pennies to the smallfolk," the boy objected.

"Do you want to catch a chill?" She would not risk it; Tommen had never been as robust as Joffrey. "Your grandfather would want you to look a proper king at his wake. We will not appear at the Great Sept wet and bedraggled." *Bad enough I must wear mourning again.* Black had never been a happy color on her. With her fair skin, it made her look half a corpse herself. Cersei had risen an hour before dawn to bathe and fix her hair, and she did not intend to let the rain destroy her efforts.

Inside the litter, Tommen settled back against his pillows and peered out at the falling rain. "The gods are weeping for grandfather. Lady Jocelyn says the raindrops are their tears."

"Jocelyn Swyft is a fool. If the gods could weep, they would have wept for your brother. Rain is rain. Close the curtain before you let any more in. That mantle is sable, would you have it soaked?"

Tommen did as he was bid. His meekness troubled her. A king had to be strong. *Joffrey would have argued. He was never easy to cow.* "Don't slump so," she told Tommen. "Sit like a king. Put your shoulders back and straighten your crown. Do you want it to tumble off your head in front of all your lords?"

"No, Mother." The boy sat straight and reached up to fix the crown. Joff's crown was too big for him. Tommen had always inclined to plumpness, but his face seemed thinner now. *Is he eating well?* She must remember to ask the steward. She could not risk Tommen growing ill, not with Myrcella in the hands of the Dornishmen. *He will grow into Joff's crown in time.* Until he did, a smaller one might be needed, one that did not threaten to swallow his head. She would take it up with the goldsmiths.

The litter made its slow way down Aegon's High Hill. Two Kingsguard rode before them, white knights on white horses with white cloaks hanging sodden from their shoulders. Behind came fifty Lannister guardsmen in gold and crimson.

Tommen peered through the drapes at the empty streets. "I thought there would be more people. When Father died, all the people came out to watch us go by."

"This rain has driven them inside." King's Landing had never loved Lord Tywin. *He never wanted love, though. "You cannot eat love, nor buy a horse with it, nor warm your halls on a cold night,"* she heard him tell Jaime once, when her brother had been no older than Tommen.

At the Great Sept of Baelor, that magnificence in marble atop Visenya's Hill, the little knot of mourners were outnumbered by the gold cloaks that Ser Addam Marbrand had drawn up across the plaza. *More will turn out later,* the queen told herself as Ser Meryn Trant helped her from the litter. Only the highborn and their retinues were to be admitted to the morning service; there would be another in the afternoon for the commons, and the evening prayers were open to all. Cersei would need to return for that, so that the smallfolk might see her mourn. *The mob must have its show.* It was a nuisance. She had offices to fill, a war to win, a realm to rule. Her father would have understood that.

The High Septon met them at the top of the steps. A bent old man with a wispy grey beard, he was so stooped by the weight of his ornate embroidered robes that his eyes were on a level with the queen's breasts... though his crown, an airy confection of cut crystal and spun gold, added a good foot and a half to his height.

Lord Tywin had given him that crown to replace the one that was lost when the mob killed the previous High Septon. They had pulled the fat fool from his litter and torn him apart, the day Myrcella sailed for Dorne. *That one was a great glutton, and biddable. This one...* This High Septon was of Tyrion's making, Cersei recalled suddenly. It was a disquieting thought.

The old man's spotted hand looked like a chicken claw as it poked from a sleeve encrusted with golden scrollwork and small crystals. Cersei knelt

on the wet marble and kissed his fingers, and bid Tommen to do the same. *What does he know of me? How much did the dwarf tell him?* The High Septon smiled as he escorted her into the sept. But was it a threatening smile full of unspoken knowledge, or just some vacuous twitch of an old man's wrinkled lips? The queen could not be certain.

They made their way through the Hall of Lamps beneath colored globes of leaded glass, Tommen's hand in hers. Trant and Kettleblack flanked them, water dripping from their wet cloaks to puddle on the floor. The High Septon walked slowly, leaning on a weirwood staff topped by a crystal orb. Seven of the Most Devout attended him, shimmering in cloth-of-silver. Tommen wore cloth-of-gold beneath his sable mantle, the queen an old gown of black velvet lined with ermine. There'd been no time to have a new one made, and she could not wear the same dress she had worn for Joffrey, nor the one she'd buried Robert in.

At least I will not be expected to don mourning for Tyrion. I shall dress in crimson silk and cloth-of-gold for that, and wear rubies in my hair. The man who brought her the dwarf's head would be raised to lordship, she had proclaimed, no matter how mean and low his birth or station. Ravens were carrying her promise to every part of the Seven Kingdoms, and soon enough word would cross the narrow sea to the Nine Free Cities and the lands beyond. Let the Imp run to the ends of the earth, he will not escape me.

The royal procession passed through the inner doors into the cavernous heart of the Great Sept, and down a wide aisle, one of seven that met beneath the dome. To right and left, highborn mourners sank to their knees as the king and queen went by. Many of her father's bannermen were here, and knights who had fought beside Lord Tywin in half a hundred battles. The sight of them made her feel more confident. *I am not without friends.*

Under the Great Sept's lofty dome of glass and gold and crystal, Lord Tywin Lannister's body rested upon a stepped marble bier. At its head Jaime stood at vigil, his one good hand curled about the hilt of a tall golden greatsword whose point rested on the floor. The hooded cloak he wore was as white as freshly fallen snow, and the scales of his long hauberk were

mother-of-pearl chased with gold. *Lord Tywin would have wanted him in Lannister gold and crimson, she thought. It always angered him to see Jaime all in white.* Her brother was growing his beard again as well. The stubble covered his jaw and cheeks, and gave his face a rough, uncouth look. *He might at least have waited till Father's bones were interred beneath the Rock.*

Cersei led the king up three short steps, to kneel beside the body. Tommen's eyes were filled with tears. "Weep quietly," she told him, leaning close. "You are a king, not a squalling child. Your lords are watching you." The boy swiped the tears away with the back of his hand. He had her eyes, emerald green, as large and bright as Jaime's eyes had been when he was Tommen's age. Her brother had been such a *pretty* boy... but fierce as well, as fierce as Joffrey, a true lion cub. The queen put her arm around Tommen and kissed his golden curls. *He will need me to teach him how to rule and keep him safe from his enemies.* Some of them stood around them even now, pretending to be friends.

The silent sisters had armored Lord Tywin as if to fight some final battle. He wore his finest plate, heavy steel enameled a deep, dark crimson, with gold inlay on his gauntlets, greaves, and breastplate. His rondels were golden sunbursts; a golden lioness crouched upon each shoulder; a maned lion crested the greathelm beside his head. Upon his chest lay a longsword in a gilded scabbard studded with rubies, his hands folded about its hilt in gloves of gilded mail. *Even in death his face is noble, she thought, although the mouth...* The corners of her father's lips curved upward ever so slightly, giving him a look of vague bemusement. *That should not be.* She blamed Pycelle; he should have told the silent sisters that Lord Tywin Lannister never smiled. *The man is as useless as nipples on a breastplate.* That half smile made Lord Tywin seem less fearful, somehow. That, and the fact that his eyes were closed. Her father's eyes had always been unsettling; pale green, almost luminous, flecked with gold. His eyes could see inside you, could see how weak and worthless and ugly you were down deep. *When he looked at you, you knew.*

Unbidden, a memory came to her, of the feast King Aerys had thrown when Cersei first came to court, a girl as green as summer grass. Old Merryweather had been nattering about raising the duty on wine when Lord Rykker said, "If we need gold, His Grace should sit Lord Tywin on his chamber pot." Aerys and his lickspittles laughed loudly, whilst Father stared at Rykker over his wine cup. Long after the merriment had died that gaze had lingered. Rykker turned away, turned back, met Father's eyes, then ignored them, drank a tankard of ale, and stalked off red-faced, defeated by a pair of unflinching eyes.

Lord Tywin's eyes are closed forever now, Cersei thought. It is my look they will flinch from now, my frown that they must fear. I am a lion too.

It was gloomy within the sept with the sky so grey outside. If the rain ever stopped, the sun would slant down through the hanging crystals to drape the corpse in rainbows. The Lord of Casterly Rock deserved rainbows. He had been a great man. *I shall be greater, though. A thousand years from now, when the maesters write about this time, you shall be remembered only as Queen Cersei's sire.*

"Mother." Tommen tugged her sleeve. "What smells so bad?"

My lord father. "Death." She could smell it too; a faint whisper of decay that made her want to wrinkle her nose. Cersei paid it no mind. The seven septons in the silver robes stood behind the bier, beseeching the Father Above to judge Lord Tywin justly. When they were done, seventy-seven septas gathered before the altar of the Mother and began to sing to her for mercy. Tommen was fidgeting by then, and even the queen's knees had begun to ache. She glanced at Jaime. Her twin stood as if he had been carved from stone, and would not meet her eyes.

On the benches, their uncle Kevan knelt with his shoulders slumped, his son beside him. *Lancel looks worse than Father.* Though only seventeen, he might have passed for seventy; grey-faced, gaunt, with hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, and hair as white and brittle as chalk. *How can Lancel be among the living when Tywin Lannister is dead? Have the gods taken leave of their wits?*

Lord Gyles was coughing more than usual and covering his nose with a square of red silk. *He can smell it too.* Grand Maester Pycelle had his eyes closed. *If he has fallen asleep, I swear I will have him whipped.* To the right of the bier knelt the Tyrells: the Lord of Highgarden, his hideous mother and vapid wife, his son Garlan and his daughter Margaery. *Queen Margaery*, she reminded herself; Joff's widow and Tommen's wife-to-be. Margaery looked very like her brother, the Knight of Flowers. The queen wondered if they had other things in common. *Our little rose has a good many ladies waiting attendance on her, night and day.* They were with her now, almost a dozen of them. Cersei studied their faces, wondering. *Who is the most fearful, the most wanton, the hungriest for favor? Who has the loosest tongue?* She would need to make a point of finding out.

It was a relief when the singing finally ended. The smell coming off her father's corpse seemed to have grown stronger. Most of the mourners had the decency to pretend that nothing was amiss, but Cersei saw two of Lady Margaery's cousins wrinkling their little Tyrell noses. As she and Tommen were walking back down the aisle the queen thought she heard someone mutter "privy" and chortle, but when she turned her head to see who had spoken a sea of solemn faces gazed at her blankly. *They would never have dared make japes about him when he was still alive. He would have turned their bowels to water with a look.*

Back out in the Hall of Lamps, the mourners buzzed about them thick as flies, eager to shower her with useless condolences. The Redwyne twins both kissed her hand, their father her cheeks. Hallyne the Pyromancer promised her that a flaming hand would burn in the sky above the city on the day her father's bones went west. Between coughs, Lord Gyles told her that he had hired a master stonecarver to make a statue of Lord Tywin, to stand eternal vigil beside the Lion Gate. Ser Lambert Turnberry appeared with a patch over his right eye, swearing that he would wear it until he could bring her the head of her dwarf brother.

No sooner had the queen escaped the clutches of that fool than she found herself cornered by Lady Falyse of Stokeworth and her husband, Ser Balman Byrch. "My lady mother sends her regrets, Your Grace," Falyse

burbled at her. “Lollys has been taken to bed with the child and she felt the need to stay with her. She begs that you forgive her, and said I should ask you... my mother admired your late father above all other men. Should my sister have a little boy, it is her wish that we might name him Tywin, if... if it please you.”

Cersei stared at her, aghast. “Your lackwit sister gets herself raped by half of King’s Landing, and Tanda thinks to honor the bastard with my lord father’s name? I think not.”

Falyse flinched back as if she’d been slapped, but her husband only stroked his thick blond mustache with a thumb. “I told Lady Tanda as much. We shall find a more, ah... a more fitting name for Lollys’s bastard, you have my word.”

“See that you do.” Cersei showed them a shoulder and moved away. Tommen had fallen into the clutches of Margaery Tyrell and her grandmother, she saw. The Queen of Thorns was so short that for an instant Cersei took her for another child. Before she could rescue her son from the roses, the press brought her face-to-face with her uncle. When the queen reminded him of their meeting later, Ser Kevan gave a weary nod and begged leave to withdraw. But Lancel lingered, the very picture of a man with one foot in the grave. *But is he climbing in or climbing out?*

Cersei forced herself to smile. “Lancel, I am happy to see you looking so much stronger. Maester Ballabar brought us such dire reports, we feared for your life. But I would have thought you on your way to Darry by now, to take up your lordship.” Her father had made Lancel a lord after the Battle of the Blackwater, as a sop to his brother Kevan.

“Not as yet. There are outlaws in my castle.” Her cousin’s voice was as wispy as the mustache on his upper lip. Though his hair had gone white, his mustache fuzz remained a sandy color. Cersei had often gazed up at it while the boy was inside her, pumping dutifully away. *It looks like a smudge of dirt on his lip.* She used to threaten to scrub it off with a little spit. “The riverlands have need of a strong hand, my father says.”

A pity that they’re getting yours, she wanted to say. Instead she smiled. “And you are to be wed as well.”

A gloomy look passed across the young knight's ravaged face. "A Frey girl, and not of my choosing. She is not even maiden. A widow, of Darry blood. My father says that will help me with the peasants, but the peasants are all dead." He reached for her hand. "It is cruel, Cersei. Your Grace knows that I love—"

"—House Lannister," she finished for him. "No one can doubt that, Lancel. May your wife give you strong sons." *Best not let her lord grandfather host the wedding, though.* "I know you will do many noble deeds in Darry."

Lancel nodded, plainly miserable. "When it seemed that I might die, my father brought the High Septon to pray for me. He is a good man." Her cousin's eyes were wet and shiny, a child's eyes in an old man's face. "He says the Mother spared me for some holy purpose, so I might atone for my sins."

Cersei wondered how he intended to atone for her. *Knighting him was a mistake, and bedding him a bigger one.* Lancel was a weak reed, and she liked his newfound piety not at all; he had been much more amusing when he was trying to be Jaime. *What has this mewling fool told the High Septon? And what will he tell his little Frey when they lie together in the dark?* If he confessed to bedding Cersei, well, she could weather that. Men were always lying about women; she would put it down as the braggadocio of a callow boy smitten by her beauty. *If he sings of Robert and the strongwine, though...* "Atonement is best achieved through prayer," Cersei told him. "Silent prayer." She left him to think about that and girded herself to face the Tyrell host.

Margaery embraced her like a sister, which the queen found presumptuous, but this was not the place to reproach her. Lady Alerie and the cousins contented themselves with kissing fingers. Lady Graceford, who was large with child, asked the queen's leave to name it Tywin if it were a boy, or Lanna if it were a girl. *Another one?* she almost groaned. *The realm will drown in Tywins.* She gave consent as graciously as she could, feigning delight.

It was Lady Merryweather who truly pleased her. “Your Grace,” that one said, in her sultry Myrish tones, “I have sent word to my friends across the narrow sea, asking them to seize the Imp at once should he show his ugly face in the Free Cities.”

“Do you have many friends across the water?”

“In Myr, many. In Lys as well, and Tyrosh. Men of power.”

Cersei could well believe it. The Myrish woman was too beautiful by half; long-legged and full-breasted, with smooth olive skin, ripe lips, huge dark eyes, and thick black hair that always looked as if she’d just come from bed. *She even smells of sin, like some exotic lotus.* “Lord Merryweather and I wish only to serve Your Grace and the little king,” the woman purred, with a look that was as pregnant as Lady Graceford.

This one is ambitious, and her lord is proud but poor. “We must speak again, my lady. Taena, is it? You are most kind. I know that we shall be great friends.”

Then the Lord of Highgarden descended on her.

Mace Tyrell was no more than ten years older than Cersei, yet she thought of him as her father’s age, not her own. He was not quite so tall as Lord Tywin had been, but otherwise he was bigger, with a thick chest and a gut grown even thicker. His hair was chestnut-colored, but there were specks of white and grey in his beard. His face was often red. “Lord Tywin was a great man, an *extraordinary* man,” he declared ponderously after he had kissed both her cheeks. “We shall never see his like again, I fear.”

You are looking at his like, fool, Cersei thought. *It is his daughter standing here before you.* But she needed Tyrell and the strength of Highgarden to keep Tommen on his throne, so all she said was, “He will be greatly missed.”

Tyrell put a hand upon her shoulder. “No man alive is fit to don Lord Tywin’s armor, that is plain. Still, the realm goes on, and must be ruled. If there is aught that I might do to serve in this dark hour, Your Grace need only ask.”

If you want to be the King's Hand, my lord, have the courage to say it plainly. The queen smiled. Let him read into that as much as he likes. "Surely my lord is needed in the Reach?"

"My son Willas is an able lad," the man replied, refusing to take her perfectly good hint. "His leg may be twisted but he has no want of wits. And Garlan will soon take Brightwater. Between them the Reach will be in good hands, if it happens that I am needed elsewhere. The governance of the realm must come first, Lord Tywin often said. And I am pleased to bring Your Grace good tidings in that regard. My uncle Garth has agreed to serve as master of coin, as your lord father wished. He is making his way to Oldtown to take ship. His sons will accompany him. Lord Tywin mentioned something about finding places for the two of them as well. Perhaps in the City Watch."

The queen's smile had frozen so hard she feared her teeth might crack. Garth the Gross on the small council and his two bastards in the gold cloaks... do the Tyrells think I will just serve the realm up to them on a gilded platter? The arrogance of it took her breath away.

"Garth has served me well as Lord Seneschal, as he served my father before me," Tyrell was going on. "Littlefinger had a nose for gold, I grant you, but Garth—"

"My lord," Cersei broke in, "I fear there has been some misunderstanding. I have asked Lord Gyles Rosby to serve as our new master of coin, and he has done me the honor of accepting."

Mace gaped at her. "Rosby? That... *cougher*? But... the matter was agreed, Your Grace. Garth is on his way to Oldtown."

"Best send a raven to Lord Hightower and ask him to make certain your uncle does not take ship. We would hate for Garth to brave an autumn sea for nought." She smiled pleasantly.

A flush crept up Tyrell's thick neck. "This... your lord father assured me..." He began to sputter.

Then his mother appeared and slid her arm through his own. "It would seem that Lord Tywin did not share his plans with our regent, I can't

imagine why. Still, there 'tis, no use hectoring Her Grace. She is quite right, you must write Lord Leyton before Garth boards a ship. You know the sea will sicken him and make his farting worse." Lady Olenna gave Cersei a toothless smile. "Your council chambers will smell sweeter with Lord Gyles, though I daresay that coughing would drive me to distraction. We all adore dear old uncle Garth, but the man is flatulent, that cannot be gainsaid. I do abhor foul smells." Her wrinkled face wrinkled up even more. "I caught a whiff of something unpleasant in the holy sept, in truth. Mayhaps you smelled it too?"

"No," Cersei said coldly. "A scent, you say?"

"More like a stink."

"Perhaps you miss your autumn roses. We have kept you here too long." The sooner she rid the court of Lady Olenna the better. Lord Tyrell would doubtless dispatch a goodly number of knights to see his mother safely home, and the fewer Tyrell swords in the city, the more soundly the queen would sleep.

"I do long for the fragrances of Highgarden, I confess it," said the old lady, "but of course I cannot leave until I have seen my sweet Margaery wed to your precious little Tommen."

"I await that day eagerly as well," Tyrell put in. "Lord Tywin and I were on the point of setting a date, as it happens. Perhaps you and I might take up that discussion, Your Grace."

"Soon."

"Soon will serve," said Lady Olenna with a sniff. "Now come along, Mace, let Her Grace get on with her... grief."

I will see you dead, old woman, Cersei promised herself as the Queen of Thorns tottered off between her towering guardsmen, a pair of seven-footers that it amused her to call Left and Right. *We'll see how sweet a corpse you make*. The old woman was twice as clever as her lord son, that was plain.

The queen rescued her son from Margaery and her cousins, and made for the doors. Outside, the rain had finally stopped. The autumn air smelled

sweet and fresh. Tommen took his crown off. “Put that back on,” Cersei commanded him.

“It makes my neck hurt,” the boy said, but he did as he was bid. “Will I be married soon? Margaery says that as soon as we’re wed we can go to Highgarden.”

“You are not going to Highgarden, but you can ride back to the castle.” Cersei beckoned to Ser Meryn Trant. “Bring His Grace a mount, and ask Lord Gyles if he would do me the honor of sharing my litter.” Things were moving more quickly than she had anticipated; there was no time to be squandered.

Tommen was happy at the prospect of a ride, and of course Lord Gyles was honored by her invitation... though when she asked him to be her master of coin, he began coughing so violently that she feared he might die right then and there. But the Mother was merciful, and Gyles eventually recovered sufficiently to accept, and even began coughing out the names of men he wanted to replace, customs officers and wool factors appointed by Littlefinger, even one of the keepers of the keys.

“Name the cow what you will, so long as the milk flows. And should the question arise, you joined the council yesterday.”

“Yester—” A fit of coughing bent him over. “Yesterday. To be sure.” Lord Gyles coughed into a square of red silk, as if to hide the blood in his spittle. Cersei pretended not to notice.

When he dies I will find someone else. Perhaps she would recall Littlefinger. The queen could not imagine that Petyr Baelish would be allowed to remain Lord Protector of the Vale for very long, with Lysa Arryn dead. The Vale lords were already stirring, if what Pycelle said was true. *Once they take that wretched boy away from him, Lord Petyr will come crawling back.*

“Your Grace?” Lord Gyles coughed, and dabbed his mouth. “Might I...” He coughed again. “...ask who...” Another series of coughs racked him. “...who will be the King’s Hand?”

“My uncle,” she replied absently.

It was a relief to see the gates of the Red Keep looming large before her. She gave Tommen over to the charge of his squires and retired gratefully to her own chambers to rest.

No sooner had she eased off her shoes than Jocelyn entered timidly to say that Qyburn was without and craved audience. "Send him in," the queen commanded. *A ruler gets no rest.*

Qyburn was old, but his hair still had more ash than snow in it, and the laugh lines around his mouth made him look like some little girl's favorite grandfather. *A rather shabby grandfather, though.* The collar of his robe was frayed, and one sleeve had been torn and badly sewn. "I must beg Your Grace's pardon for my appearance," he said. "I have been down in the dungeons making inquiries into the Imp's escape, as you commanded."

"And what have you discovered?"

"The night that Lord Varys and your brother disappeared, a third man also vanished."

"Yes, the gaoler. What of him?"

"Rugen was the man's name. An undergaoler who had charge of the black cells. The chief undergaoler describes him as portly, unshaven, gruff of speech. He held his appointment of the old king, Aerys, and came and went as he pleased. The black cells have not oft been occupied in recent years. The other turnkeys were afraid of him, it seems, but none knew much about him. He had no friends, no kin. Nor did he drink or frequent brothels. His sleeping cell was damp and dreary, and the straw he slept upon was mildewed. His chamber pot was overflowing."

"I know all this." Jaime had examined Rugen's cell, and Ser Addam's gold cloaks had examined it again.

"Aye, Your Grace," said Qyburn, "but did you know that under that stinking chamber pot was a loose stone, which opened on a small hollow? The sort of place where a man might hide valuables that he did not wish to be discovered?"

"Valuables?" This was new. "Coin, you mean?" She had suspected all along that Tyrion had somehow bought this gaoler.

“Beyond a doubt. To be sure, the hole was empty when I found it. No doubt Rugen took his ill-gotten treasure with him when he fled. But as I crouched over the hole with my torch, I saw something glitter, so I scratched in the dirt until I dug it out.” Qyburn opened his palm. “A gold coin.”

Gold, yes, but the moment Cersei took it she could tell that it was wrong. *Too small*, she thought, *too thin*. The coin was old and worn. On one side was a king’s face in profile, on the other side the imprint of a hand. “This is no dragon,” she said.

“No,” Qyburn agreed. “It dates from before the Conquest, Your Grace. The king is Garth the Twelfth, and the hand is the sigil of House Gardener.”

Of Highgarden. Cersei closed her hand around the coin. What treachery is this? Mace Tyrell had been one of Tyrion’s judges, and had called loudly for his death. Was that some ploy? Could he have been plotting with the Imp all the while, conspiring at Father’s death? With Tywin Lannister in his grave, Lord Tyrell was an obvious choice to be King’s Hand, but even so... “You will not speak of this with anyone,” she commanded.

“Your Grace may trust in my discretion. Any man who rides with a sellsword company learns to hold his tongue, else he does not keep it long.”

“In my company as well.” The queen put the coin away. She would think about it later. “What of the other matter?”

“Ser Gregor.” Qyburn shrugged. “I have examined him, as you commanded. The poison on the Viper’s spear was mantichore venom from the east, I would stake my life on that.”

“Pycelle says no. He told my lord father that mantichore venom kills the instant it reaches the heart.”

“And so it does. But this venom has been *thickened* somehow, so as to draw out the Mountain’s dying.”

“Thickened? Thickened *how*? With some other substance?”

“It may be as Your Grace suggests, though in most cases adulterating a poison only lessens its potency. It may be that the cause is... less natural, let us say. A spell, I think.”

Is this one as big a fool as Pycelle? “So are you telling me that the Mountain is dying of some black *sorcery*?”

Qyburn ignored the mockery in her voice. “He is dying of the venom, but slowly, and in exquisite agony. My efforts to ease his pain have proved as fruitless as Pycelle’s. Ser Gregor is overly accustomed to the poppy, I fear. His squire tells me that he is plagued by blinding headaches and oft quaffs the milk of the poppy as lesser men quaff ale. Be that as it may, his veins have turned black from head to heel, his water is clouded with pus, and the venom has eaten a hole in his side as large as my fist. It is a wonder that the man is still alive, if truth be told.”

“His size,” the queen suggested, frowning. “Gregor is a very large man. Also a very stupid one. Too stupid to know when he should die, it seems.” She held out her cup, and Senelle filled it once again. “His screaming frightens Tommen. It has even been known to wake me of a night. I would say it is past time we summoned Ilyn Payne.”

“Your Grace,” said Qyburn, “mayhaps I might move Ser Gregor to the dungeons? His screams will not disturb you there, and I will be able to tend to him more freely.”

“Tend to him?” She laughed. “Let Ser Ilyn tend to him.”

“If that is Your Grace’s wish,” Qyburn said, “but this poison... it would be useful to know more about it, would it not? Send a knight to slay a knight and an archer to kill an archer, the smallfolk often say. To combat the black arts...” He did not finish the thought, but only smiled at her.

He is not Pycelle, that much is plain. The queen weighed him, wondering. “Why did the Citadel take your chain?”

“The archmaesters are all craven at heart. The grey sheep, Marwyn calls them. I was as skilled a healer as Ebrose, but aspired to surpass him. For hundreds of years the men of the Citadel have opened the bodies of the dead, to study the nature of life. I wished to understand the nature of death, so I opened the bodies of the living. For that crime the grey sheep shamed me and forced me into exile... but I understand the nature of life and death better than any man in Oldtown.”

“Do you?” That intrigued her. “Very well. The Mountain is yours. Do what you will with him, but confine your studies to the black cells. When he dies, bring me his head. My father promised it to Dorne. Prince Doran would no doubt prefer to kill Gregor himself, but we all must suffer disappointments in this life.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” Qyburn cleared his throat. “I am not so well provided as Pycelle, however. I must needs equip myself with certain...”

“I shall instruct Lord Gyles to provide you with gold sufficient for your needs. Buy yourself some new robes as well. You look as though you’ve wandered up from Flea Bottom.” She studied his eyes, wondering how far she dared trust this one. “Need I say that it will go ill for you if any word of your... labors... should pass beyond these walls?”

“No, Your Grace.” Qyburn gave her a reassuring smile. “Your secrets are safe with me.”

When he was gone, Cersei poured herself a cup of strongwine and drank it by the window, watching the shadows lengthen across the yard and thinking about the coin. *Gold from the Reach. Why would an undergaoler in King’s Landing have gold from the Reach, unless he were paid to help bring about Father’s death?*

Try as she might, she could not seem to bring Lord Tywin’s face to mind without seeing that silly little half smile and remembering the foul smell coming off his corpse. She wondered whether Tyrion was somehow behind that as well. *It is small and cruel, like him.* Could Tyrion have made Pycelle his catspaw? *He sent the old man to the black cells, and this Rugen had charge of those cells,* she remembered. All the strings were tangled up together in ways she did not like. *This High Septon is Tyrion’s creature too,* Cersei recalled suddenly, *and Father’s poor body was in his care from dark till dawn.*

Her uncle arrived promptly at sunset, wearing a quilted doublet of charcoal-colored wool as somber as his face. Like all the Lannisters, Ser Kevan was fair-skinned and blond, though at five-and-fifty he had lost most of his hair. No one would ever call him comely. Thick of waist, round of shoulder, with a square jutting chin that his close-cropped yellow beard did

little to conceal, he reminded her of some old mastiff... but a faithful old mastiff was the very thing that she required.

They ate a simple supper of beets and bread and bloody beef with a flagon of Dornish red to wash it all down. Ser Kevan said little and scarce touched his wine cup. *He broods too much*, she decided. *He needs to be put to work to get beyond his grief.*

She said as much, when the last of the food had been cleared away and the servants had departed. "I know how much my father relied on you, Uncle. Now I must do the same."

"You need a Hand," he said, "and Jaime has refused you."

He is blunt. Very well. "Jaime... I felt so lost with Father dead, I scarce knew what I was saying. Jaime is gallant, but a bit of a fool, let us be frank. Tommen needs a more seasoned man. Someone older..."

"Mace Tyrell is older."

Her nostrils flared. "Never." Cersei pushed a lock of hair off her brow. "The Tyrells overreach themselves."

"You would be a fool to make Mace Tyrell your Hand," Ser Kevan admitted, "but a bigger fool to make him your foe. I've heard what happened in the Hall of Lamps. Mace should have known better than to broach such matters in public, but even so, you were unwise to shame him in front of half the court."

"Better that than suffer another Tyrell on the council." His reproach annoyed her. "Rosby will make an adequate master of coin. You've seen that litter of his, with its carvings and silk draperies. His horses are better dressed than most knights. A man that rich should have no problem finding gold. As for Handship... who better to finish my father's work than the brother who shared all his counsels?"

"Every man needs someone he can trust. Tywin had me, and once your mother."

"He loved her very much." Cersei refused to think about the dead whore in his bed. "I know they are together now."

“So I pray.” Ser Kevan studied her face for a long moment before he replied. “You ask much of me, Cersei.”

“No more than my father did.”

“I am tired.” Her uncle reached for his wine cup and took a swallow. “I have a wife I have not seen in two years, a dead son to mourn, another son about to marry and assume a lordship. Castle Darry must be made strong again, its lands protected, its burned fields plowed and planted anew. Lancel needs my help.”

“As does Tommen.” Cersei had not expected Kevan to require coaxing. *He never played coy with Father.* “The realm needs you.”

“The realm. Aye. And House Lannister.” He sipped his wine again. “Very well. I will remain and serve His Grace...”

“Very good,” she started to say, but Ser Kevan raised his voice and bulled right over her.

“...so long as you name me regent as well as Hand and take yourself back to Casterly Rock.”

For half a heartbeat Cersei could only stare at him. “*I am the regent,*” she reminded him.

“You were. Tywin did not intend that you continue in that role. He told me of his plans to send you back to the Rock and find a new husband for you.”

Cersei could feel her anger rising. “He spoke of such, yes. And I told him it was not my wish to wed again.”

Her uncle was unmoved. “If you are resolved against another marriage, I will not force it on you. As to the other, though... you are the Lady of Casterly Rock now. Your place is there.”

How dare you? she wanted to scream. Instead, she said, “I am also the Queen Regent. My place is with my son.”

“Your father thought not.”

“My father is dead.”

“To my grief, and the woe of all the realm. Open your eyes and look about you, Cersei. The kingdom is in ruins. Tywin might have been able to set matters aright, but...”

“*I shall set matters aright!*” Cersei softened her tone. “With your help, Uncle. If you will serve me as faithfully as you served my father—”

“You are not your father. And Tywin always regarded Jaime as his rightful heir.”

“*Jaime...* Jaime has taken vows. Jaime never thinks, he laughs at everything and everyone and says whatever comes into his head. Jaime is a handsome fool.”

“And yet he was your first choice to be the King’s Hand. What does that make you, Cersei?”

“I told you, I was sick with grief, I did not think—”

“No,” Ser Kevan agreed. “Which is why you should return to Casterly Rock and leave the king with those who do.”

“*The king is my son!*” Cersei rose to her feet.

“Aye,” her uncle said, “and from what I saw of Joffrey, you are as unfit a mother as you are a ruler.”

She threw the contents of her wine cup full in his face.

Ser Kevan rose with a ponderous dignity. “Your Grace.” Wine trickled down his cheeks and dripped from his close-cropped beard. “With your leave, might I withdraw?”

“By what right do you presume to give *me* terms? You are no more than one of my father’s household knights.”

“I hold no lands, that is true. But I have certain incomes, and chests of coin set aside. My own father forgot none of his children when he died, and Tywin knew how to reward good service. I feed two hundred knights and can double that number if need be. There are freeriders who will follow my banner, and I have the gold to hire sellswords. You would be wise not to take me lightly, Your Grace... and wiser still not to make of me a foe.”

“Are you *threatening* me?”

“I am counseling you. If you will not yield the regency to me, name me your castellan for Casterly Rock and make either Mathis Rowan or Randyll Tarly the Hand of the King.”

Tyrell bannermen, both of them. The suggestion left her speechless. Is he bought? she wondered. Has he taken Tyrell gold to betray House Lannister?

“Mathis Rowan is sensible, prudent, well liked,” her uncle went on, oblivious. “Randyll Tarly is the finest soldier in the realm. A poor Hand for peacetime, but with Tywin dead there’s no better man to finish this war. Lord Tyrell cannot take offense if you choose one of his own bannermen as Hand. Both Tarly and Rowan are able men... and *loyal*. Name either one, and you make him yours. You strengthen yourself and weaken Highgarden, yet Mace will likely thank you for it.” He gave a shrug. “That is my counsel, take it or no. You may make Moon Boy your Hand for all I care. My brother is dead, woman. I am going to take him home.”

Traitor, she thought. *Turncloak*. She wondered how much Mace Tyrell had given him. “You would abandon your king when he needs you most,” she told him. “You would abandon Tommen.”

“Tommen has his mother.” Ser Kevan’s green eyes met her own, unblinking. A last drop of wine trembled wet and red beneath his chin, and finally fell. “Aye,” he added softly, after a pause, “and his father too, I think.”