

EPILOGUE

“I am no traitor,” the Knight of Griffin’s Roost declared. “I am King Tommen’s man, and yours.”

A steady *drip-drip-drip* punctuated his words, as snowmelt ran off his cloak to puddle on the floor. The snow had been falling on King’s Landing most of the night; outside the drifts were ankle deep. Ser Kevan Lannister pulled his cloak about himself more closely. “So you say, ser. Words are wind.”

“Then let me prove the truth of them with my sword.” The light of the torches made a fiery blaze of Ronnet Connington’s long red hair and beard. “Send me against my uncle, and I will bring you back his head, and the head of this false dragon too.”

Lannister spearmen in crimson cloaks and lion-crested halfhelms stood along the west wall of the throne room. Tyrell guards in green cloaks faced them from the opposite wall. The chill in the throne room was palpable. Though neither Queen Cersei nor Queen Margaery was amongst them, their presence could be felt poisoning the air, like ghosts at a feast.

Behind the table where the five members of the king’s small council were seated, the Iron Throne crouched like some great black beast, its barbs and claws and blades half-shrouded in shadow. Kevan Lannister could feel it at his back, an itch between the shoulder blades. It was easy to imagine old King Aerys perched up there, bleeding from some fresh cut, glowering down. But today the throne was empty. He had seen no reason for Tommen to join them. Kinder to let the boy remain with his mother. The Seven only knew how long mother and son might have together before Cersei’s trial ... and possibly her execution.

Mace Tyrell was speaking. “We shall deal with your uncle and his feigned boy in due time.” The new King’s Hand was seated on an oaken throne carved in the shape of a hand, an absurd vanity his lordship had produced the day Ser Kevan agreed to grant him the office he coveted. “You will bide

here until we are ready to march. Then you shall have the chance to prove your loyalty.”

Ser Kevan took no issue with that. “Escort Ser Ronnet back to his chambers,” he said. *And see that he remains there* went unspoken. However loud his protestations, the Knight of Griffin’s Roost remained suspect. Supposedly the sellswords who had landed in the south were being led by one of his own blood.

As the echoes of Connington’s footsteps faded away, Grand Maester Pycelle gave a ponderous shake of his head. “His uncle once stood just where the boy was standing now and told King Aerys how he would deliver him the head of Robert Baratheon.”

That is how it is when a man grows as old as Pycelle. Everything you see or hear reminds you of something you saw or heard when you were young. “How many men-at-arms accompanied Ser Ronnet to the city?” Ser Kevan asked.

“Twenty,” said Lord Randyll Tarly, “and most of them Gregor Clegane’s old lot. Your nephew Jaime gave them to Connington. To rid himself of them, I’d wager. They had not been in Maidenpool a day before one killed a man and another was accused of rape. I had to hang the one and geld the other. If it were up to me, I would send them all to the Night’s Watch, and Connington with them. The Wall is where such scum belong.”

“A dog takes after its master,” declared Mace Tyrell. “Black cloaks would suit them, I agree. I will not suffer such men in the city watch.” A hundred of his own Highgarden men had been added to the gold cloaks, yet plainly his lordship meant to resist any balancing infusion of westermen.

The more I give him, the more he wants. Kevan Lannister was beginning to understand why Cersei had grown so resentful of the Tyrells. But this was not the moment to provoke an open quarrel. Randyll Tarly and Mace Tyrell had both brought armies to King’s Landing, whilst the best part of the strength of House Lannister remained in the riverlands, fast melting away. “The Mountain’s men were always fighters,” he said in a conciliatory tone,

“and we may have need of every sword against these sellswords. If this truly is the Golden Company, as Qyburn’s whisperers insist—”

“Call them what you will,” said Randyll Tarly. “They are still no more than adventurers.”

“Perhaps,” Ser Kevan said. “But the longer we ignore these adventurers, the stronger they grow. We have had a map prepared, a map of the incursions. Grand Maester?”

The map was beautiful, painted by a master’s hand on a sheet of the finest vellum, so large it covered the table. “Here.” Pycelle pointed with a spotted hand. Where the sleeve of his robe rode up, a flap of pale flesh could be seen dangling beneath his forearm. “Here and here. All along the coast, and on the islands. Tarth, the Stepstones, even Estermont. And now we have reports that Connington is moving on Storm’s End.”

“If it is Jon Connington,” said Randyll Tarly. “Storm’s End.” Lord Mace Tyrell grunted the words. “He cannot take Storm’s End. Not if he were Aegon the Conqueror. And if he does, what of it? Stannis holds it now. Let the castle pass from one pretender to another, why should that trouble us? I shall recapture it after my daughter’s innocence is proved.”

How can you recapture it when you have never captured it to begin with? “I understand, my lord, but—”

Tyrell did not let him finish. “These charges against my daughter are filthy lies. I ask again, *why* must we play out this mummer’s farce? Have King Tommen declare my daughter innocent, ser, and put an end to the foolishness here and now.”

Do that, and the whispers will follow Margaery the rest of her life. “No man doubts your daughter’s innocence, my lord,” Ser Kevan lied, “but His High Holiness insists upon a trial.”

Lord Randyll snorted. “What have we become, when kings and high lords must dance to the twittering of sparrows?”

“We have foes on every hand, Lord Tarly,” Ser Kevan reminded him. “Stannis in the north, ironmen in the west, sellswords in the south. Defy the High Septon, and we will have blood running in the gutters of King’s Landing as well. If we are seen to be going against the gods, it will only drive the pious into the arms of one or the other of these would-be usurpers.”

Mace Tyrell remained unmoved. “Once Paxter Redwyne sweeps the ironmen from the seas, my sons will retake the Shields. The snows will do for Stannis, or Bolton will. As for Connington ...”

“If it is him,” Lord Randyll said. “... as for Connington,” Tyrell repeated, “what victories has he ever won that we should fear him? He could have ended Robert’s Rebellion at Stoney Sept. He failed. Just as the Golden Company has always failed. Some may rush to join them, aye. The realm is well rid of such fools.”

Ser Kevan wished that he could share his certainty. He had known Jon Connington, slightly—a proud youth, the most headstrong of the gaggle of young lordlings who had gathered around Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, competing for his royal favor. *Arrogant, but able and energetic.* That, and his skill at arms, was why Mad King Aerys had named him Hand. Old Lord Merryweather’s inaction had allowed the rebellion to take root and spread, and Aerys wanted someone young and vigorous to match Robert’s own youth and vigor. “Too soon,” Lord Tywin Lannister had declared when word of the king’s choice had reached Casterly Rock. “Connington is too young, too bold, too eager for glory.”

The Battle of the Bells had proved the truth of that. Ser Kevan had expected that afterward Aerys would have no choice but to summon Tywin once more ... but the Mad King had turned to the Lords Chelsted and Rossart instead, and paid for it with life and crown. *That was all so long ago, though. If this is indeed Jon Connington, he will be a different man. Older, harder, more seasoned ... more dangerous.* “Connington may have more than the Golden Company. It is said he has a Targaryen pretender.”

“A feigned boy is what he has,” said Randyll Tarly. “That may be. Or not.” Kevan Lannister had been here, in this very hall when Tywin had laid the

bodies of Prince Rhaegar's children at the foot of the Iron Throne, wrapped up in crimson cloaks. The girl had been recognizably the Princess Rhaenys, but the boy ... *a faceless horror of bone and brain and gore, a few hanks of fair hair. None of us looked long. Tywin said that it was Prince Aegon, and we took him at his word.* "We have these tales coming from the east as well. A second Targaryen, and one whose blood no man can question. Daenerys Stormborn."

"As mad as her father," declared Lord Mace Tyrell.

That would be the same father that Highgarden and House Tyrell supported to the bitter end and well beyond. "Mad she may be," Ser Kevan said, "but with so much smoke drifting west, surely there must be some fire burning in the east."

Grand Maester Pycelle bobbed his head. "Dragons. These same stories have reached Oldtown. Too many to discount. A silver-haired queen with three dragons."

"At the far end of the world," said Mace Tyrell. "Queen of Slaver's Bay, aye. She is welcome to it."

"On that we can agree," Ser Kevan said, "but the girl is of the blood of Aegon the Conqueror, and I do not think she will be content to remain in Meereen forever. If she should reach these shores and join her strength to Lord Connington and this prince of his, feigned or no ... we must destroy Connington and his pretender *now*, before Daenerys Stormborn can come west."

Mace Tyrell crossed his arms. "I mean to do just that, ser. *After* the trials."

"Sellswords fight for coin," declared Grand Maester Pycelle. "With enough gold, we might persuade the Golden Company to hand over Lord Connington and the pretender."

"Aye, if we had gold," Ser Harys Swyft said. "Alas, my lords, our vaults contain only rats and roaches. I have written again to the Myrish bankers. If

they will agree to make good the crown's debt to the Braavosi and extend us a new loan, mayhaps we will not have to raise the taxes. Else-wise—”

“The magisters of Pentos have been known to lend money as well,” said Ser Kevan. “Try them.” The Pentoshi were even less like to be of help than the Myrish money changers, but the effort must be made. Unless a new source of coin could be found, or the Iron Bank persuaded to relent, he would have no choice but to pay the crown's debts with Lannister gold. He dare not resort to new taxes, not with the Seven Kingdoms crawling with rebellion. Half the lords in the realm could not tell taxation from tyranny, and would bolt to the nearest usurper in a heartbeat if it would save them a clipped copper. “If that fails, you may well need to go to Braavos, to treat with the Iron Bank yourself.”

Ser Harys quailed. “Must I?”

“You *are* the master of coin,” Lord Randyll said sharply. “I am.” The puff of white hair at the end of Swyft's chin quivered in outrage. “Must I remind my lord, this trouble is not of my doing? And not all of us have had the opportunity to refill our coffers with the plunder of Maidenpool and Dragonstone.”

“I resent your implication, Swyft,” Mace Tyrell said, bristling. “No wealth was found on Dragonstone, I promise you. My son's men have searched every inch of that damp and dreary island and turned up not so much as a single gemstone or speck of gold. Nor any sign of this fabled hoard of dragon eggs.”

Kevan Lannister had seen Dragonstone with his own eyes. He doubted very much that Loras Tyrell had searched every inch of that ancient stronghold. The Valyrians had raised it, after all, and all their works stank of sorcery. And Ser Loras was young, prone to all the rash judgments of youth, and had been grievously wounded storming the castle besides. But it would not do to remind Tyrell that his favorite son was fallible. “If there was wealth on Dragonstone, Stannis would have found it,” he declared.

“Let us move along, my lords. We have two queens to try for high treason, you may recall. My niece has elected trial by battle, she informs me. Ser

Robert Strong will champion her.”

“The silent giant.” Lord Randyll grimaced. “Tell me, ser, where did this man come from?” demanded Mace Tyrell. “Why have we never heard his name before? He does not speak, he will not show his face, he is never seen without his armor. Do we know for a certainty that he is even a knight?”

We do not even know if he's alive. Meryn Trant claimed that Strong took neither food nor drink, and Boros Blount went so far as to say he had never seen the man use the privy. *Why should he? Dead men do not shit.* Kevan Lannister had a strong suspicion of just who this Ser Robert really was beneath that gleaming white armor. A suspicion that Mace Tyrell and Randyll Tarly no doubt shared. Whatever the face hidden behind Strong's helm, it must remain hidden for now. The silent giant was his niece's only hope. *And pray that he is as formidable as he appears.*

But Mace Tyrell could not seem to see beyond the threat to his own daughter. “His Grace named Ser Robert to the Kingsguard,” Ser Kevan reminded him, “and Qyburn vouches for the man as well. Be that as it may, we need Ser Robert to prevail, my lords. If my niece is proved guilty of these treasons, the legitimacy of her children will be called into question. If Tommen ceases to be a king, Margaery will cease to be a queen.” He let Tyrell chew on that a moment. “Whatever Cersei may have done, she is still a daughter of the Rock, of mine own blood. I will not let her die a traitor's death, but I have made sure to draw her fangs. All her guards have been dismissed and replaced with my own men. In place of her former ladies-in-waiting, she will henceforth be attended by a septa and three novices selected by the High Septon. She is to have no further voice in the governance of the realm, nor in Tommen's education. I mean to return her to Casterly Rock after the trial and see that she remains there. Let that suffice.”

The rest he left unsaid. Cersei was soiled goods now, her power at an end. Every baker's boy and beggar in the city had seen her in her shame and every tart and tanner from Flea Bottom to Pisswater Bend had gazed upon her nakedness, their eager eyes crawling over her breasts and belly and woman's parts. No queen could expect to rule again after that. In gold and silk and emeralds Cersei had been a queen, the next thing to a goddess;

naked, she was only human, an aging woman with stretch marks on her belly and teats that had begun to sag ... as the shrews in the crowds had been glad to point out to their husbands and lovers. *Better to live shamed than die proud*, Ser Kevan told himself. “My niece will make no further mischief,” he promised Mace Tyrell. “You have my word on that, my lord.”

Tyrell gave a grudging nod. “As you say. My Margaery prefers to be tried by the Faith, so the whole realm can bear witness to her innocence.”

If your daughter is as innocent as you’d have us believe, why must you have your army present when she faces her accusers? Ser Kevan might have asked. “Soon, I hope,” he said instead, before turning to Grand Maester Pycelle. “Is there aught else?”

The Grand Maester consulted his papers. “We should address the Rosby inheritance. Six claims have been put forth—”

“We can settle Rosby at some later date. What else?”

“Preparations should be made for Princess Myrcella.”

“This is what comes of dealing with the Dornish,” Mace Tyrell said. “Surely a better match can be found for the girl?”

Such as your own son Willas, perhaps? Her disfigured by one Dornishman, him crippled by another? “No doubt,” Ser Kevan said, “but we have enemies enough without offending Dorne. If Doran Martell were to join his strength to Connington’s in support of this feigned dragon, things could go very ill for all of us.”

“Mayhaps we can persuade our Dornish friends to deal with Lord Connington,” Ser Harys Swyft said with an irritating titter. “That would save a deal of blood and trouble.”

“It would,” Ser Kevan said wearily. Time to put an end to this. “Thank you, my lords. Let us convene again five days hence. After Cersei’s trial.”

“As you say. May the Warrior lend strength to Ser Robert’s arms.” The words were grudging, the dip of the chin Mace Tyrell gave the Lord Regent the most cursory of bows. But it was something, and for that much Ser Kevan Lannister was grateful.

Randyll Tarly left the hall with his liege lord, their green-cloaked spear-men right behind them. *Tarly is the real danger*, Ser Kevan reflected as he watched their departure. *A narrow man, but iron-willed and shrewd, and as good a soldier as the Reach could boast. But how do I win him to our side?*

“Lord Tyrell loves me not,” Grand Maester Pycelle said in gloomy tones when the Hand had departed. “This matter of the moon tea ... I would never have spoken of such, but the Queen Dowager commanded me! If it please the Lord Regent, I would sleep more soundly if you could lend me some of your guards.”

“Lord Tyrell might take that amiss.”

Ser Harys Swyft tugged at his chin beard. “I am in need of guards myself. These are perilous times.”

Aye, thought Kevan Lannister, *and Pycelle is not the only council member our Hand would like to replace*. Mace Tyrell had his own candidate for lord treasurer: his uncle, Lord Seneschal of Highgarden, whom men called Garth the Gross. *The last thing I need is another Tyrell on the small council*. He was already outnumbered. Ser Harys was his wife’s father, and Pycelle could be counted upon as well. But Tarly was sworn to Highgarden, as was Paxter Redwyne, lord admiral and master of ships, presently sailing his fleet around Dorne to deal with Euron Greyjoy’s ironmen. Once Redwyne returned to King’s Landing, the council would stand at three and three, Lannister and Tyrell.

The seventh voice would be the Dornishwoman now escorting Myrcella home. *The Lady Nym. But no lady, if even half of what Qyburn reports is true*. A bastard daughter of the Red Viper, near as notorious as her father and intent on claiming the council seat that Prince Oberyn himself had occupied so briefly. Ser Kevan had not yet seen fit to inform Mace Tyrell of

her coming. The Hand, he knew, would not be pleased. *The man we need is Littlefinger. Petyr Baelish had a gift for conjuring dragons from the air.*

“Hire the Mountain’s men,” Ser Kevan suggested. “Red Ronnet will have no further use for them.” He did not think that Mace Tyrell would be so clumsy as to try to murder either Pycelle or Swyft, but if guards made them feel safer, let them have guards.

The three men walked together from the throne room. Outside the snow was swirling round the outer ward, a caged beast howling to be free. “Have you ever felt such cold?” asked Ser Harys.

“The time to speak of the cold,” said Grand Maester Pycelle, “is not when we are standing out in it.” He made his slow way across the outer ward, back to his chambers.

The others lingered for a moment on the throne room steps. “I put no faith in these Myrish bankers,” Ser Kevan told his good-father. “You had best prepare to go to Braavos.”

Ser Harys did not look happy at the prospect. “If I must. But I say again, this trouble is not of my doing.”

“No. It was Cersei who decided that the Iron Bank would wait for their due. Should I send her to Braavos?”

Ser Harys blinked. “Her Grace ... that ... that ...”

Ser Kevan rescued him. “That was a jape. A bad one. Go and find a warm fire. I mean to do the same.” He yanked his gloves on and set off across the yard, leaning hard into the wind as his cloak snapped and swirled behind him.

The dry moat surrounding Maegor’s Holdfast was three feet deep in snow, the iron spikes that lined it glistening with frost. The only way in or out of Maegor’s was across the drawbridge that spanned that moat. A knight of the Kingsguard was always posted at its far end. Tonight the duty had fallen to Ser Meryn Trant. With Balon Swann hunting the rogue knight Darkstar

down in Dorne, Loras Tyrell gravely wounded on Dragon-stone, and Jaime vanished in the riverlands, only four of the White Swords remained in King's Landing, and Ser Kevan had thrown Osmund Kettleblack (and his brother Osfryd) into the dungeon within hours of Cersei's confessing that she had taken both men as lovers. That left only Trant, the feeble Boros Blount, and Qyburn's mute monster Robert Strong to protect the young king and royal family.

I will need to find some new swords for the Kingsguard. Tommen should have seven good knights about him. In the past the Kingsguard had served for life, but that had not stopped Joffrey from dismissing Ser Barristan Selmy to make a place for his dog, Sandor Clegane. Kevan could make use of that precedent. *I could put Lancel in a white cloak,* he reflected. *There is more honor in that than he will ever find in the Warrior's Sons.*

Kevan Lannister hung his snow-sodden cloak inside his solar, pulled off his boots, and commanded his serving man to fetch some fresh wood for his fire. "A cup of mulled wine would go down well," he said as he settled by the hearth. "See to it."

The fire soon thawed him, and the wine warmed his insides nicely. It also made him sleepy, so he dare not drink another cup. His day was far from done. He had reports to read, letters to write. *And supper with Cersei and the king.* His niece had been subdued and submissive since her walk of atonement, thank the gods. The novices who attended her reported that she spent a third of her waking hours with her son, another third in prayer, and the rest in her tub. She was bathing four or five times a day, scrubbing herself with horsehair brushes and strong lye soap, as if she meant to scrape her skin off.

She will never wash the stain away, no matter how hard she scrubs. Ser Kevan remembered the girl she once had been, so full of life and mischief. And when she'd flowered, ahhhh ... had there ever been a maid so sweet to look upon? *If Aerys had agreed to marry her to Rhaegar, how many deaths might have been avoided?* Cersei could have given the prince the sons he wanted, lions with purple eyes and silver manes ... and with such a wife, Rhaegar might never have looked twice at Lyanna Stark. The northern girl

had a wild beauty, as he recalled, though however bright a torch might burn it could never match the rising sun.

But it did no good to brood on lost battles and roads not taken. That was a vice of old done men. Rhaegar had wed Elia of Dorne, Lyanna Stark had died, Robert Baratheon had taken Cersei to bride, and here they were. And tonight his own road would take him to his niece's chambers and face-to-face with Cersei.

I have no reason to feel guilty, Ser Kevan told himself. Tywin would understand that, surely. It was his daughter who brought shame down on our name, not I. What I did I did for the good of House Lannister.

It was not as if his brother had never done the same. In their father's final years, after their mother's passing, their sire had taken the comely daughter of a candlemaker as mistress. It was not unknown for a widowed lord to keep a common girl as bedwarmer ... but Lord Tytos soon began seating the woman beside him in the hall, showering her with gifts and honors, even asking her views on matters of state. Within a year she was dismissing servants, ordering about his household knights, even speaking for his lordship when he was indisposed. She grew so influential that it was said about Lannisport that any man who wished for his petition to be heard should kneel before her and speak loudly to her lap ... for Tytos Lannister's ear was between his lady's legs. She had even taken to wearing their mother's jewels.

Until the day their lord father's heart had burst in his chest as he was ascending a steep flight of steps to her bed, that is. All the self-seekers who had named themselves her friends and cultivated her favor had abandoned her quickly enough when Tywin had her stripped naked and paraded through Lannisport to the docks, like a common whore. Though no man laid a hand on her, that walk spelled the end of her power. Surely Tywin would never have dreamed that same fate awaited his own golden daughter.

"It had to be," Ser Kevan muttered over the last of his wine. His High Holiness had to be appeased. Tommen needed the Faith behind him in the battles to come. And Cersei ... the golden child had grown into a vain,

foolish, greedy woman. Left to rule, she would have ruined Tommen as she had Joffrey.

Outside the wind was rising, clawing at the shutters of his chamber. Ser Kevan pushed himself to his feet. Time to face the lioness in her den. *We have pulled her claws. Jaime, though ...* But no, he would not brood on that.

He donned an old, well-worn doublet, in case his niece had a mind to throw another cup of wine in his face, but he left his sword belt hanging on the back of his chair. Only the knights of the Kingsguard were permitted swords in Tommen's presence.

Ser Boros Blount was in attendance on the boy king and his mother when Ser Kevan entered the royal chambers. Blount wore enameled scale, white cloak, and halfhelm. He did not look well. Of late Boros had grown notably heavier about the face and belly, and his color was not good. And he was leaning against the wall behind him, as if standing had become too great an effort for him.

The meal was served by three novices, well-scrubbed girls of good birth between the ages of twelve and sixteen. In their soft white woolens, each seemed more innocent and unworldly than the last, yet the High Septon had insisted that no girl spend more than seven days in the queen's service, lest Cersei corrupt her. They tended the queen's wardrobe, drew her bath, poured her wine, changed her bedclothes of a morning. One shared the queen's bed every night, to ascertain she had no other company; the other two slept in an adjoining chamber with the septa who looked over them.

A tall stork of a girl with a pockmarked face escorted him into the royal presence. Cersei rose when he entered and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Dear uncle. It is so good of you to sup with us." The queen was dressed as modestly as any matron, in a dark brown gown that buttoned up to her throat and a hooded green mantle that covered her shaved head. *Before her walk she would have flaunted her baldness beneath a golden crown.* "Come, sit," she said. "Will you have wine?"

"A cup." He sat, still wary.

A freckled novice filled their cups with hot spiced wine. “Tommen tells me that Lord Tyrell intends to rebuild the Tower of the Hand,” Cersei said.

Ser Kevan nodded. “The new tower will be twice as tall as the one you burned, he says.”

Cersei gave a throaty laugh. “Long lances, tall towers ... is Lord Tyrell hinting at something?”

That made him smile. *It is good that she still remembers how to laugh.* When he asked if she had all that she required, the queen said, “I am well served. The girls are sweet, and the good septas make certain that I say my prayers. But once my innocence is proved, it would please me if Taena Merryweather might attend me once again. She could bring her son to court. Tommen needs other boys about him, friends of noble birth.”

It was a modest request. Ser Kevan saw no reason why it should not be granted. He could foster the Merryweather boy himself, whilst Lady Taena accompanied Cersei back to Casterly Rock. “I will send for her after the trial,” he promised.

Supper began with beef-and-barley soup, followed by a brace of quail and a roast pike near three feet long, with turnips, mushrooms, and plenty of hot bread and butter. Ser Boros tasted every dish that was set before the king. A humiliating duty for a knight of the Kingsguard, but perhaps all Blount was capable of these days ... and wise, after the way Tommen’s brother had died.

The king seemed happier than Kevan Lannister had seen him in a long time. From soup to sweet Tommen burred about the exploits of his kittens, whilst feeding them morsels of pike off his own royal plate. “The bad cat was outside my window last night,” he informed Kevan at one point, “but Ser Pounce hissed at him and he ran off across the roofs.”

“The bad cat?” Ser Kevan said, amused. *He is a sweet boy.* “An old black tomcat with a torn ear,” Cersei told him. “A filthy thing, and foul-tempered. He clawed Joff’s hand once.” She made a face. “The cats keep the rats

down, I know, but that one ... he's been known to attack ravens in the rookery."

"I will ask the ratters to set a trap for him." Ser Kevan could not remember ever seeing his niece so quiet, so subdued, so demure. All for the good, he supposed. But it made him sad as well. *Her fire is quenched, she who used to burn so bright.* "You have not asked about your brother," he said, as they were waiting for the cream cakes. Cream cakes were the king's favorite.

Cersei lifted her chin, her green eyes shining in the candlelight. "Jaime? Have you had word?"

"None. Cersei, you may need to prepare yourself for—"

"If he were dead, I would know it. We came into this world together, Uncle. He would not go without me." She took a drink of wine. "Tyrion can leave whenever he wishes. You have had no word of him either, I suppose."

"No one has tried to sell us a dwarf's head of late, no."

She nodded. "Uncle, may I ask you a question?"

"Whatever you wish."

"Your wife ... do you mean to bring her to court?"

"No." Dorna was a gentle soul, never comfortable but at home with friends and kin around her. She had done well by their children, dreamed of having grandchildren, prayed seven times a day, loved needlework and flowers. In King's Landing she would be as happy as one of Tommen's kittens in a pit of vipers. "My lady wife dislikes travel. Lannisport is her place."

"It is a wise woman who knows her place."

He did not like the sound of that. "Say what you mean."

"I thought I did." Cersei held out her cup. The freckled girl filled it once again. The cream cakes appeared then, and the conversation took a lighter

turn. Only after Tommen and his kittens were escorted off to the royal bedchamber by Ser Boros did their talk turn to the queen's trial.

"Osney's brothers will not stand by idly and watch him die," Cersei warned him.

"I did not expect that they would. I've had the both of them arrested." That seemed to take her aback. "For what crime?"

"Fornication with a queen. His High Holiness says that you confessed to bedding both of them—had you forgotten?"

Her face reddened. "No. What will you do with them?"

"The Wall, if they admit their guilt. If they deny it, they can face Ser Robert. Such men should never have been raised so high."

Cersei lowered her head. "I ... I misjudged them."

"You misjudged a good many men, it seems."

He might have said more, but the dark-haired novice with the round cheeks returned to say, "My lord, my lady, I am sorry to intrude, but there is a boy below. Grand Maester Pycelle begs the favor of the Lord Regent's presence at once."

Dark wings, dark words, Ser Kevan thought. *Could Storm's End have fallen? Or might this be word from Bolton in the north?*

"It might be news of Jaime," the queen said.

There was only one way to know. Ser Kevan rose. "Pray excuse me." Before he took his leave, he dropped to one knee and kissed his niece upon the hand. If her silent giant failed her, it might be the last kiss she would ever know.

The messenger was a boy of eight or nine, so bundled up in fur he seemed a bear cub. Trant had kept him waiting out on the drawbridge rather than admit him into Maegor's. "Go find a fire, lad," Ser Kevan told him,

pressing a penny into his hand. “I know the way to the rookery well enough.”

The snow had finally stopped falling. Behind a veil of ragged clouds, a full moon floated fat and white as a snowball. The stars shone cold and distant. As Ser Kevan made his way across the inner ward, the castle seemed an alien place, where every keep and tower had grown icy teeth, and all familiar paths had vanished beneath a white blanket. Once an icicle long as a spear fell to shatter by his feet. *Autumn in King’s Landing*, he brooded. *What must it be like up on the Wall?*

The door was opened by a serving girl, a skinny thing in a fur-lined robe much too big for her. Ser Kevan stamped the snow off his boots, removed his cloak, tossed it to her. “The Grand Maester is expecting me,” he announced. The girl nodded, solemn and silent, and pointed to the steps.

Pycelle’s chambers were beneath the rookery, a spacious suite of rooms cluttered with racks of herbs and salves and potions and shelves jammed full of books and scrolls. Ser Kevan had always found them uncomfortably hot. Not tonight. Once past the chamber door, the chill was palpable. Black ash and dying embers were all that remained of the hearthfire. A few flickering candles cast pools of dim light here and there.

The rest was shrouded in shadow ... except beneath the open window, where a spray of ice crystals glittered in the moonlight, swirling in the wind. On the window seat a raven loitered, pale, huge, its feathers ruffled. It was the largest raven that Kevan Lannister had ever seen. Larger than any hunting hawk at Casterly Rock, larger than the largest owl. Blowing snow danced around it, and the moon painted it silver.

Not silver. White. The bird is white.

The white ravens of the Citadel did not carry messages, as their dark cousins did. When they went forth from Oldtown, it was for one purpose only: to herald a change of seasons.

“Winter,” said Ser Kevan. The word made a white mist in the air. He turned away from the window.

Then something slammed him in the chest between the ribs, hard as a giant's fist. It drove the breath from him and sent him lurching backwards. The white raven took to the air, its pale wings slapping him about the head. Ser Kevan half-sat and half-fell onto the window seat. *What ... who ...* A quarrel was sunk almost to the fletching in his chest. *No. No, that was how my brother died.* Blood was seeping out around the shaft. "Pycelle," he muttered, confused. "Help me ... I ..."

Then he saw. Grand Maester Pycelle was seated at his table, his head pillowed on the great leather-bound tome before him. *Sleeping*, Kevan thought ... until he blinked and saw the deep red gash in the old man's spotted skull and the blood pooled beneath his head, staining the pages of his book. All around his candle were bits of bone and brain, islands in a lake of melted wax.

He wanted guards, Ser Kevan thought. *I should have sent him guards.* Could Cersei have been right all along? Was this his nephew's work? "Tyrion?" he called. "Where ... ?"

"Far away," a half-familiar voice replied.

He stood in a pool of shadow by a bookcase, plump, pale-faced, round-shouldered, clutching a crossbow in soft powdered hands. Silk slippers swaddled his feet.

"Varys?"

The eunuch set the crossbow down. "Ser Kevan. Forgive me if you can. I bear you no ill will. This was not done from malice. It was for the realm. For the children."

I have children. I have a wife. Oh, Dorna. Pain washed over him. He closed his eyes, opened them again. "There are ... there are hundreds of Lannister guardsmen in this castle."

"But none in this room, thankfully. This pains me, my lord. You do not deserve to die alone on such a cold dark night. There are many like you, good men in service to bad causes ... but you were threatening to undo all

the queen's good work, to reconcile Highgarden and Casterly Rock, bind the Faith to your little king, unite the Seven Kingdoms under Tommen's rule. So ..."

A gust of wind blew up. Ser Kevan shivered violently. "Are you cold, my lord?" asked Varys. "Do forgive me. The Grand Maester befouled himself in dying, and the stink was so abominable that I thought I might choke."

Ser Kevan tried to rise, but the strength had left him. He could not feel his legs.

"I thought the crossbow fitting. You shared so much with Lord Tywin, why not that? Your niece will think the Tyrells had you murdered, mayhaps with the connivance of the Imp. The Tyrells will suspect her. Someone somewhere will find a way to blame the Dornishmen. Doubt, division, and mistrust will eat the very ground beneath your boy king, whilst Aegon raises his banner above Storm's End and the lords of the realm gather round him."

"Aegon?" For a moment he did not understand. Then he remembered. A babe swaddled in a crimson cloak, the cloth stained with his blood and brains. "Dead. He's dead."

"No." The eunuch's voice seemed deeper. "He is here. Aegon has been shaped for rule since before he could walk. He has been trained in arms, as befits a knight to be, but that was not the end of his education. He reads and writes, he speaks several tongues, he has studied history and law and poetry. A septa has instructed him in the mysteries of the Faith since he was old enough to understand them. He has lived with fisherfolk, worked with his hands, swum in rivers and mended nets and learned to wash his own clothes at need. He can fish and cook and bind up a wound, he knows what it is like to be hungry, to be hunted, to be afraid. Tommen has been taught that kingship is his right. Aegon knows that kingship is his duty, that a king must put his people first, and live and rule for them."

Kevan Lannister tried to cry out ... to his guards, his wife, his brother ... but the words would not come. Blood dribbled from his mouth. He shuddered violently.

“I am sorry.” Varys wrung his hands. “You are suffering, I know, yet here I stand going on like some silly old woman. Time to make an end to it.” The eunuch pursed his lips and gave a little whistle.

Ser Kevan was cold as ice, and every labored breath sent a fresh stab of pain through him. He glimpsed movement, heard the soft scuffling sound of slippered feet on stone. A child emerged from a pool of darkness, a pale boy in a ragged robe, no more than nine or ten. Another rose up behind the Grand Maester’s chair. The girl who had opened the door for him was there as well. They were all around him, half a dozen of them, white-faced children with dark eyes, boys and girls together.

And in their hands, the daggers.