

CERSEI

Each night seemed colder than the last.

The cell had neither fireplace nor brazier. The only window was too high to allow her a view and too small to squeeze through, but more than large enough to let in the chill. Cersei had torn up the first shift they gave her, demanding the return of her own clothes, but that only left her naked and shivering. When they brought her another shift, she pulled it down over her head and thanked them, choking upon the words.

The window let in sounds as well. That was the only way the queen had to know what might be happening in the city. The septas who brought her food would tell her nothing.

She hated that. Jaime would be coming for her, but how would she know when he arrived? Cersei only hoped he was not so foolish as to go racing ahead of his army. He would need every sword to deal with the ragged horde of Poor Fellows surrounding the Great Sept. She asked about her twin often, but her gaolers gave no answer. She asked about Ser Loras too. At last report the Knight of Flowers had been dying on Dragonstone of wounds received whilst taking the castle. *Let him die*, Cersei thought, *and let him be quick about it*. The boy's death would mean an empty place on the Kingsguard, and that might be her salvation. But the septas were as close-mouthed about Loras Tyrell as they were about Jaime.

Lord Qyburn had been her last and only visitor. Her world had a population of four: herself and her three gaolers, pious and unyielding. Septa Unella was big-boned and mannish, with callused hands and homely, scowling features. Septa Moelle had stiff white hair and small mean eyes perpetually crinkled in suspicion, peering out of a wrinkled face as sharp as the blade of an axe. Septa Scolera was thick-waisted and short, with heavy breasts, olive skin, and a sour smell to her, like milk on the verge of going bad. They brought her food and water, emptied her chamber pot, and took away her shift for washing every few days, leaving her to huddle naked under her blanket until it was returned to her. Sometimes Scolera would read to her

from *The Seven-Pointed Star* or *The Book of Holy Prayer*, but otherwise none of them would speak with her or answer any of her questions.

She hated and despised all three of them, almost as much as she hated and despised the men who had betrayed her.

False friends, treacherous servants, men who had professed undying love, even her own blood ... all of them had deserted her in her hour of need. Osney Kettleblack, that weakling, had broken beneath the lash, filling the High Sparrow's ears with secrets he should have taken to his grave. His brothers, scum of the streets whom she had raised high, did no more than sit upon their hands. Aurane Waters, her admiral, had fled to sea with the dromonds she had built for him. Orton Merryweather had gone running back to Longtable, taking his wife, Taena, who had been the queen's one true friend in these terrible times. Harys Swyft and Grand Maester Pycelle had abandoned her to captivity and offered the realm to the very men who had conspired against her. Meryn Trant and Boros Blount, the king's sworn protectors, were nowhere to be found. Even her cousin Lancel, who once had claimed to love her, was one of her accusers. Her uncle had refused to help her rule when she would have made him the King's Hand.

And Jaime ...

No, that she could not believe, would not believe. Jaime would be here once he knew of her plight. "*Come at once,*" she had written to him. "*Help me. Save me. I need you now as I have never needed you before. I love you. I love you. I love you. Come at once.*" Qyburn had sworn that he would see that her letter reached her twin, off in the riverlands with his army. Qyburn had never returned, however. For all she knew, he might be dead, his head impaled upon a spike above the city Keep's gates. Or perhaps he was languishing in one of the black cells beneath the Red Keep, her letter still unsent. The queen had asked after him a hundred times, but her captors would not speak of him. All she knew for certain was that Jaime had not come.

Not yet, she told herself. But soon. And once he comes the High Sparrow and his bitches will sing a different song.

She hated feeling helpless.

She had threatened, but her threats had been received with stony faces and deaf ears. She had commanded, but her commands had been ignored. She had invoked the Mother's mercy, appealing to the natural sympathy of one woman for another, but the three shriveled septas must have put their womanhood aside when they spoke their vows. She had tried charm, speaking to them gently, accepting each new outrage meekly. They were not swayed. She had offered them rewards, promised leniency, honors, gold, positions at court. They treated her promises as they did her threats.

And she had prayed. Oh, how she had prayed. Prayer was what they wanted, so she served it to them, served it on her knees as if she were some common trollop of the streets and not a daughter of the Rock. She had prayed for relief, for deliverance, for Jaime. Loudly she asked the gods to defend her in her innocence; silently she prayed for her accusers to suffer sudden, painful deaths. She prayed until her knees were raw and bloody, until her tongue felt so thick and heavy that she was like to choke on it. All the prayers they had taught her as a girl came back to Cersei in her cell, and she made up new ones as needed, calling on the Mother and the Maiden, on the Father and the Warrior, on the Crone and the Smith. She had even prayed to the Stranger. *Any god in a storm.* The Seven proved as deaf as their earthly servants. Cersei gave them all the words that she had in her, gave them everything but tears. *That they will never have,* she told herself.

She hated feeling weak.

If the gods had given her the strength they gave Jaime and that swaggering oaf Robert, she could have made her own escape. *Oh, for a sword and the skill to wield it.* She had a warrior's heart, but the gods in their blind malice had given her the feeble body of a woman. The queen had tried to fight them early on, but the septas had overwhelmed her. There were too many of them, and they were stronger than they looked. Ugly old women, every one of them, but all that praying and scrubbing and beating novices with sticks had left them tough as roots.

And they would not let her rest. Night or day, whenever the queen closed her eyes to sleep, one of her captors would appear to wake her and demand

that she confess her sins. She stood accused of adultery, fornication, high treason, even murder, for Osney Kettleblack had confessed to smothering the last High Septon at her command. "I am come to hear you tell of all your murders and fornications," Septa Unella would growl when she shook the queen awake. Septa Moelle would tell her that it was her sins that kept her sleepless. "Only the innocent know the peace of untroubled sleep. Confess your sins, and you will sleep like a newborn babe."

Wake and sleep and wake again, every night was broken into pieces by the rough hands of her tormentors, and every night was colder and crueler than the night before. The hour of the owl, the hour of the wolf, the hour of the nightingale, moonrise and moonset, dusk and dawn, they staggered past like drunkards. What hour was it? What day was it? Where was she? Was this a dream, or had she woken? The little shards of sleep that they allowed her turned into razors, slicing at her wits. Each day found her duller than the day before, exhausted and feverish. She had lost all sense of how long she had been imprisoned in this cell, high up in one of the seven towers of the Great Sept of Baelor. *I will grow old and die here*, she thought, despairing.

Cersei could not allow that to happen. Her son had need of her. The realm had need of her. She had to free herself, no matter what the risk. Her world had shrunk to a cell six feet square, a chamber pot, a lumpy pallet, and a brown wool blanket thin as hope that made her skin itch, but she was still Lord Tywin's heir, a daughter of the Rock.

Exhausted by her lack of sleep, shivering from the cold that stole into the tower cell each night, feverish and famished by turns, Cersei came at last to know she must confess.

That night, when Septa Unella came to wrench her out of sleep, she found the queen waiting on her knees. "I have sinned," said Cersei. Her tongue was thick in her mouth, her lips raw and chapped. "I have sinned most grievously. I see that now. How could I have been so blind for so long? The Crone came to me with her lamp raised high, and by its holy light I saw the road that I must walk. I want to be clean again. I want only absolution. Please, good septa, I beg of you, take me to the High Septon so that I might confess my crimes and fornications."

“I will tell him, Your Grace,” said Septa Unella. “His High Holiness will be most pleased. Only through confession and true repentance may our immortal souls be saved.”

And for the rest of that long night they let her sleep. Hours and hours of blessed sleep. The owl and the wolf and the nightingale slipped by for once with their passage unseen and unremarked, whilst Cersei dreamed a long sweet dream where Jaime was her husband and their son was still alive.

Come morning, the queen felt almost like herself again. When her captors came for her, she made pious noises at them again and told them how determined she was to confess her sins and be forgiven for all that she had done.

“We rejoice to hear it,” said Septa Moelle. “It will be a great weight off your soul,” said Septa Scolera. “You will feel much better afterward, Your Grace.”

Your Grace. Those two simple words thrilled her. During her long captivity, her gaolers had not oft bothered with even that simple courtesy.

“His High Holiness awaits,” said Septa Unella.

Cersei lowered her head, humble and obedient. “Might I be allowed to bathe first? I am in no fit state to attend him.”

“You may wash later if His High Holiness allows,” said Septa Unella. “It is the cleanliness of your immortal soul that should concern you now, not such vanities of the flesh.”

The three septas led her down the tower stairs, with Septa Unella going before her and Septa Moelle and Septa Scolera at her heels, as if they were afraid that she might try to flee. “It has been so long since I have had a visitor,” Cersei murmured in a quiet voice as they made their descent. “Is the king well? I ask only as a mother, fearful for her child.”

“His Grace is in good health,” said Septa Scolera, “and well protected, day and night. The queen is with him, always.”

I am the queen! She swallowed, smiled, and said, “That is good to know. Tommen loves her so. I never believed those terrible things that were being said of her.” Had Margaery Tyrell somehow wriggled free of the accusations of fornication, adultery, and high treason? “Was there a trial?”

“Soon,” said Septa Scolera, “but her brother—” “*Hush.*” Septa Unella turned to glare back over her shoulder at Scolera. “You chatter too much, you foolish old woman. It is not for us to speak of such things.”

Scolera lowered her head. “Pray forgive me.”

They made the rest of the descent in silence.

The High Sparrow received her in his sanctum, an austere seven-sided chamber where crudely carved faces of the Seven stared out from the stone walls with expressions almost as sour and disapproving as His High Holiness himself. When she entered, he was seated behind a rough-hewn table, writing. The High Septon had not changed since the last time she had been in his presence, the day he had her seized and imprisoned. He was still a scrawny grey-haired man with a lean, hard, half-starved look, his face sharp-featured, lined, his eyes suspicious. In place of the rich robes of his predecessors, he wore a shapeless tunic of undyed wool that fell down to his ankles. “Your Grace,” he said, by way of greeting. “I understand that you wish to make confession.”

Cersei dropped to her knees. “I do, High Holiness. The Crone came to me as I slept with her lamp held high—”

“To be sure. Unella, you will stay and make a record of Her Grace’s words. Scolera, Moelle, you have my leave to go.” He pressed the fingers of his hands together, the same gesture she had seen her father use a thousand times.

Septa Unella took a seat behind her, spread out a parchment, dipped a quill in maester’s ink. Cersei felt a stab of fright. “Once I have confessed, will I be permitted to—”

“Your Grace shall be dealt with according to your sins.”

This man is implacable, she realized once again. She gathered herself for a moment. “Mother have mercy on me, then. I have lain with men outside the bonds of marriage. I confess it.”

“Who?” The High Septon’s eyes were fixed on hers.

Cersei could hear Unella writing behind her. Her quill made a faint, soft scratching sound. “Lancel Lannister, my cousin. And Osney Kettleblack.” Both men had confessed to bedding her, it would do her no good to deny it. “His brothers too. Both of them.” She had no way of knowing what Osfryd and Osmund might say. Safer to confess too much than too little. “It does not excuse my sin, High Holiness, but I was lonely and afraid. The gods took King Robert from me, my love and my protector. I was alone, surrounded by schemers, false friends, and traitors who were conspiring at the death of my children. I did not know who to trust, so I ... I used the only means that I had to bind the Kettleblacks to me.”

“By which you mean your female parts?”

“My flesh.” She pressed a hand to her face, shuddering. When she lowered it again, her eyes were wet with tears. “Yes. May the Maid forgive me. It was for my children, though, for the realm. I took no pleasure in it. The Kettleblacks ... they are hard men, and cruel, and they used me roughly, but what else was I to do? Tommen needed men around him I could trust.”

“His Grace was protected by the Kingsguard.”

“The Kingsguard stood by useless as his brother Joffrey died, murdered at his own wedding feast. I watched one son die, I could not bear to lose another. I have sinned, I have committed wanton fornication, but I did it for Tommen. Forgive me, High Holiness, but I would open my legs for every man in King’s Landing if that was what I had to do to keep my children safe.”

“Forgiveness comes only from the gods. What of Ser Lancel, who was your cousin and your lord husband’s squire? Did you take him into your bed to win his loyalty as well?”

“Lancel.” Cersei hesitated. *Careful*, she told herself, *Lancel will have told him everything*. “Lancel loved me. He was half a boy, but I never doubted his devotion to me or my son.”

“And yet you still corrupted him.”

“I was lonely.” She choked back a sob. “I had lost my husband, my son, my lord father. I was regent, but a queen is still a woman, and women are weak vessels, easily tempted ... Your High Holiness knows the truth of that. Even holy septas have been known to sin. I took comfort with Lancel. He was kind and gentle and I needed someone. It was wrong, I know, but I had no one else ... a woman *needs* to be loved, she needs a man beside her, she ... she ...” She began to sob uncontrollably.

The High Septon made no move to comfort her. He sat there with his hard eyes fixed on her, watching her weep, as stony as the statues of the Seven in the sept above. Long moments passed, but finally her tears were all dried up. By then her eyes were red and raw from crying, and she felt as if she might faint.

The High Sparrow was not done with her, however. “These are common sins,” he said. “The wickedness of widows is well-known, and all women are wantons at heart, given to using their wiles and their beauty to work their wills on men. There is no treason here, so long as you did not stray from your marriage bed whilst His Grace King Robert was still alive.”

“Never,” she whispered, shivering. “*Never*, I swear it.”

He paid that no mind. “There are other charges laid against Your Grace, crimes far more grievous than simple fornications. You admit Ser Osney Kettleblack was your lover, and Ser Osney insists that he smothered my predecessor at your behest. He further insists that he bore false witness against Queen Margaery and her cousins, telling tales of fornications, adultery, and high treason, again at your behest.”

“No,” said Cersei. “It is not true. I love Margaery as I would a daughter. And the other ... I complained of the High Septon, I admit it. He was Tyrion’s creature, weak and corrupt, a stain upon our Holy Faith. Your High

Holiness knows that as well as I. It may be that Osney thought that his death would please me. If so, I bear some part of the blame ... but murder? No. Of that I am innocent. Take me to the sept and I will stand before the Father's judgment seat and swear the truth of that."

"In time," said the High Septon. "You also stand accused of conspiring at the murder of your own lord husband, our late beloved King Robert, First of His Name."

Lancel, Cersei thought. "Robert was killed by a boar. Do they say I am a skinchanger now? A warg? Am I accused of killing Joffrey too, my own sweet son, my firstborn?"

"No. Just your husband. Do you deny it?"

"I deny it. I do. Before gods and men, I deny it."

He nodded. "Last of all, and worst of all, there are some who say your children were not fathered by King Robert, that they are bastards born of incest and adultery."

"Stannis says that," Cersei said at once. "A lie, a lie, a palpable lie. Stannis wants the Iron Throne for himself, but his brother's children stand in his way, so he must needs claim that they are not his brother's. That filthy letter ... there is no shred of truth to it. I deny it."

The High Septon placed both hands flat upon the table and pushed himself to his feet. "Good. Lord Stannis has turned from the truth of the Seven to worship a red demon, and his false faith has no place in these Seven Kingdoms."

That was almost reassuring. Cersei nodded. "Even so," His High Holiness went on, "these are terrible charges, and the realm must know the truth of them. If Your Grace has told it true, no doubt a trial will prove your innocence."

A trial, still. "I have confessed—"

“—to certain sins, aye. Others you deny. Your trial will separate the truths from the falsehoods. I shall ask the Seven to forgive the sins you have confessed and pray that you be found innocent of these other accusations.”

Cersei rose slowly from her knees. “I bow to the wisdom of Your High Holiness,” she said, “but if I might beg for just one drop of the Mother’s mercy, I ... it has been so long since I last saw my son, please ...”

The old man’s eyes were chips of flint. “It would not be fitting to allow you near the king until you have been cleansed of all your wickedness. You have taken the first step on your path back to righteousness, however, and in light of that I shall permit you other visitors. One each day.”

The queen began to weep again. This time the tears were true. “You are too kind. Thank you.”

“The Mother is merciful. It is her that you should thank.”

Moelle and Scolera were waiting to lead her back up to her tower cell. Unella followed close behind them. “We have all been praying for Your Grace,” Septa Moelle said as they were climbing. “Yes,” Septa Scolera echoed, “and you must feel so much lighter now, clean and innocent as a maid on the morning of her wedding.”

I fucked Jaime on the morning of my wedding, the queen recalled. “I do,” she said, “I feel reborn, as if a festering boil has been lanced and now at last I can begin to heal. I could almost fly.” She imagined how sweet it would be to slam an elbow into Septa Scolera’s face and send her careening down the spiral steps. If the gods were good, the wrinkled old cunt might crash into Septa Unella and take her down with her.

“It is good to see you smiling again,” Scolera said. “His High Holiness said I might have visitors?”

“He did,” said Septa Unella. “If Your Grace will tell us whom you wish to see, we will send word to them.”

Jaime, I need Jaime. But if her twin was in the city, why had he not come to her? It might be wiser to wait on Jaime until she had a better notion of what was happening beyond the walls of the Great Sept of Baelor. “My uncle,” she said. “Ser Kevan Lannister, my father’s brother. Is he in the city?”

“He is,” said Septa Unella. “The Lord Regent has taken up residence in the Red Keep. We will send for him at once.”

“Thank you,” said Cersei, thinking, *Lord Regent, is it?* She could not pretend to be surprised.

A humble and a contrite heart proved to have benefits over and beyond cleansing the soul of sin. That night the queen was moved to a larger cell two floors down, with a window she could actually look out of and warm, soft blankets for her bed. And when time came for supper, instead of stale bread and oaten porridge, she was served a roast capon, a bowl of crisp greens sprinkled with crushed walnuts, and a mound of mashed neeps aswim in butter. That night she crawled into her bed with a full stomach for the first time since she was taken, and slept through the black watches of the night undisturbed.

The next morning, with the dawn, there came her uncle.

Cersei was still at her breakfast when the door swung open and Ser Kevan Lannister stepped through. “Leave us,” he told her gaolers. Septa Unella ushered Scolera and Moelle away and closed the door behind them. The queen rose to her feet.

Ser Kevan looked older than when she’d seen him last. He was a big man, broad in the shoulder and thick about the waist, with a close-cropped blond beard that followed the line of his heavy jaw and short blond hair in full retreat from his brow. A heavy woolen cloak, dyed crimson, was clasped at one shoulder with a golden brooch in the shape of a lion’s head.

“Thank you for coming,” the queen said.

Her uncle frowned. “You should sit. There are things that I must needs tell you—”

She did not want to sit. “You are still angry with me. I hear it in your voice. Forgive me, Uncle. It was wrong of me to throw my wine at you, but—”

“You think I care about a cup of wine? Lancel is my *son*, Cersei. Your own nephew. If I am angry with you, that is the cause. You should have looked after him, guided him, found him a likely girl of good family. Instead you —”

“I know. I know.” *Lancel wanted me more than I ever wanted him. He still does, I will wager.* “I was alone, weak. Please. Uncle. Oh, Uncle. It is so good to see your face, your sweet sweet face. I have done wicked things, I know, but I could not bear for you to hate me.” She threw her arms around him, kissed his cheek. “Forgive me. Forgive me.”

Ser Kevan suffered the embrace for a few heartbeats before he finally raised his own arms to return it. His hug was short and awkward. “Enough,” he said, his voice still flat and cold. “You are forgiven. Now sit. I bring some hard tidings, Cersei.”

His words frightened her. “Has something happened to Tommen? Please, no. I have been so afraid for my son. No one will tell me anything. Please tell me that Tommen is well.”

“His Grace is well. He asks about you often.” Ser Kevan laid his hands on her shoulders, held her at arm’s length.

“Jaime, then? Is it Jaime?”

“No. Jaime is still in the riverlands, somewhere.”

“Somewhere?” She did not like the sound of that. “He took Raventree and accepted Lord Blackwood’s surrender,” said her uncle, “but on his way back to Riverrun he left his tail and went off with a woman.”

“A woman?” Cersei stared at him, uncomprehending. “What woman? Why? Where did they go?”

“No one knows. We’ve had no further word of him. The woman may have been the Evenstar’s daughter, Lady Brienne.”

Her. The queen remembered the Maid of Tarth, a huge, ugly, shambling thing who dressed in man’s mail. *Jaime would never abandon me for such a creature. My raven never reached him, otherwise he would have come.*

“We have had reports of sellswords landing all over the south,” Ser Kevan was saying. “Tarth, the Stepstones, Cape Wrath ... where Stannis found the coin to hire a free company I would dearly love to know. I do not have the strength to deal with them, not here. Mace Tyrell does, but he refuses to bestir himself until this matter with his daughter has been settled.”

A headsman would settle Margaery quick enough. Cersei did not care a fig for Stannis or his sellswords. *The Others take him and the Tyrells both. Let them slaughter each other, the realm will be the better for it.* “Please, Uncle, take me out of here.”

“How? By force of arms?” Ser Kevan walked to the window and gazed out, frowning. “I would need to make an abbatoir of this holy place. And I do not have the men. The best part of our forces were at Riverrun with your brother. I had no time to raise up a new host.” He turned back to face her. “I have spoken with His High Holiness. He will not release you until you have atoned for your sins.”

“I have confessed.”

“*Atoned*, I said. Before the city. A walk—”

“No.” She knew what her uncle was about to say, and she did not want to hear it. “Never. Tell him that, if you speak again. I am a queen, not some dockside whore.”

“No harm would come to you. No one will touch—”

“*No*,” she said, more sharply. “I would sooner die.”

Ser Kevan was unmoved. “If that is your wish, you may soon have it granted. His High Holiness is resolved that you be tried for regicide, deicide, incest, and high treason.”

“Deicide?” She almost laughed. “When did I kill a god?”

“The High Septon speaks for the Seven here on earth. Strike at him, and you are striking at the gods themselves.” Her uncle raised a hand before she could protest. “It does no good to speak of such things. Not here. The time for all that is at trial.” He gazed about her cell. The look on his face spoke volumes.

Someone is listening. Even here, even now, she dare not speak freely. She took a breath. “Who will try me?”

“The Faith,” her uncle said, “unless you insist on a trial by battle. In which case you must be championed by a knight of the Kingsguard. Whatever the outcome, your rule is at an end. I will serve as Tommen’s regent until he comes of age. Mace Tyrell has been named King’s Hand. Grand Maester Pycelle and Ser Harys Swyft will continue as before, but Paxter Redwyne is now lord admiral and Randyll Tarly has assumed the duties of justiciar.”

Tyrell bannermen, the both of them. The whole governance of the realm was being handed to her enemies, Queen Margaery’s kith and kin. “Margaery stands accused as well. Her and those cousins of hers. How is it that the sparrows freed her and not me?”

“Randyll Tarly insisted. He was the first to reach King’s Landing when this storm broke, and he brought his army with him. The Tyrell girls will still be tried, but the case against them is weak, His High Holiness admits. All of the men named as the queen’s lovers have denied the accusation or recanted, save for your maimed singer, who appears to be half-mad. So the High Septon handed the girls over to Tarly’s custody and Lord Randyll swore a holy oath to deliver them for trial when the time comes.”

“And her accusers?” the queen demanded. “Who holds them?”

“Osney Kettleblack and the Blue Bard are here, beneath the sept. The Redwyne twins have been declared innocent, and Hamish the Harper has died. The rest are in the dungeons under the Red Keep, in the charge of your man Qyburn.”

Qyburn, thought Cersei. That was good, one straw at least that she could clutch. Lord Qyburn had them, and Lord Qyburn could do wonders. *And horrors. He can do horrors as well.*

“There is more, worse. *Will* you sit down?”

“Sit down?” Cersei shook her head. What could be worse? She was to be tried for high treason whilst the little queen and her cousins flew off as free as birds. “Tell me. What is it?”

“Myrcella. We have had grave news from Dorne.”

“*Tyrion*,” she said at once. Tyrion had sent her little girl to Dorne, and Cersei had dispatched Ser Balon Swann to bring her home. All Dornishmen were snakes, and the Martells were the worst of them. The Red Viper had even tried to defend the Imp, had come within a hairbreadth of a victory that would have allowed the dwarf to escape the blame for Joffrey’s murder. “It’s him, he’s been in Dorne all this time, and now he’s seized my daughter.”

Ser Kevan gave her another scowl. “Myrcella was attacked by a Dornish knight named Gerold Dayne. She’s alive, but hurt. He slashed her face open, she ... I’m sorry ... she lost an ear.”

“An ear.” Cersei stared at him, aghast. *She was just a child, my precious princess. She was so pretty, too.* “He cut off her ear. And Prince Doran and his Dornish knights, where were they? They could not defend one little girl? Where was Arys Oakheart?”

“Slain, defending her. Dayne cut him down, it’s said.”

The Sword of the Morning had been a Dayne, the queen recalled, but he was long dead. Who was this Ser Gerold and why would he wish to harm

her daughter? She could not make any sense of this, unless ... “Tyrion lost half his nose in the Battle of the Blackwater. Slashing her face, cutting off an ear ... the Imp’s grubby little fingers are all over this.”

“Prince Doran says nothing of your brother. And Balon Swann writes that Myrcella puts it all on this Gerold Dayne. Darkstar, they call him.”

She gave a bitter laugh. “Whatever they call him, he is my brother’s catspaw. Tyrion has friends amongst the Dornish. The Imp planned this all along. It was Tyrion who betrothed Myrcella to Prince Trystane. Now I see why.”

“You see Tyrion in every shadow.”

“He is a creature of the shadows. He killed Joffrey. He killed Father. Did you think he would stop there? I feared that the Imp was still in King’s Landing plotting harm to Tommen, but he must have gone to Dorne instead to kill Myrcella first.” Cersei paced the width of the cell. “I need to be with Tommen. These Kingsguard knights are as useless as nipples on a breastplate.” She rounded on her uncle. “Ser Arys was killed, you said.”

“At the hands of this man Darkstar, yes.”

“Dead, he’s *dead*, you are certain of that?”

“That is what we have been told.”

“Then there is an empty place amongst the Kingsguard. It must be filled at once. Tommen must be protected.”

“Lord Tarly is drawing up a list of worthy knights for your brother to consider, but until Jaime reappears ...”

“The king can give a man a white cloak. Tommen’s a good boy. Tell him who to name and he will name him.”

“And who would you have him name?”

She did not have a ready answer. *My champion will need a new name as well as a new face.* “Qyburn will know. Trust him in this. You and I have had our differences, Uncle, but for the blood we share and the love you bore my father, for Tommen’s sake and the sake of his poor maimed sister, do as I ask you. Go to Lord Qyburn on my behalf, bring him a white cloak, and tell him that the time has come.”