

## CERSEI

It was a slow climb to the top of Visenya's Hill. As the horses labored upward, the queen leaned back against a plump red cushion. From outside came the voice of Ser Osmund Kettleblack. *"Make way. Clear the street. Make way for Her Grace the queen."*

"Margaery *does* keep a lively court," Lady Merryweather was saying. "We have jugglers, mummers, poets, puppets..."

"Singers?" prompted Cersei.

"Many and more, Your Grace. Hamish the Harper plays for her once a fortnight, and sometimes Alaric of Eysen will entertain us of an evening, but the Blue Bard is her favorite."

Cersei recalled the bard from Tommen's wedding. *Young, and fair to look upon. Could there be something there?* "There are other men as well, I hear. Knights and courtiers. Admirers. Tell me true, my lady. Do you think Margaery is still a maiden?"

"She says she is, Your Grace."

"So she does. What do you say?"

Taena's black eyes sparkled with mischief. "When she wed Lord Renly at Highgarden, I helped disrobe him for the bedding. His lordship was a well-made man, and lusty. I saw the proof when we tumbled him into the wedding bed where his bride awaited him as naked as her name day, blushing prettily beneath the coverlets. Ser Loras had carried her up the steps himself. Margaery may say that the marriage was never consummated, that Lord Renly had drunk too much wine at the wedding feast, but I promise you, the bit between his legs was anything but weary when last I saw it."

"Did you chance to see the marriage bed the morning after?" Cersei asked. "Did she bleed?"

"No sheet was shown, Your Grace."

*A pity.* Still, the absence of a bloody sheet meant little, by itself. Common peasant girls bled like pigs upon their wedding nights, she had heard, but that was less true of highborn maids like Margaery Tyrell. A lord's daughter was more like to give her maidenhead to a horse than a husband, it was said, and Margaery had been riding since she was old enough to walk. "I understand the little queen has many admirers amongst our household knights. The Redwyne twins, Ser Tallad... who else, pray tell?"

Lady Merryweather gave a shrug. "Ser Lambert, the fool who hides a good eye behind a patch. Bayard Norcross. Courtenay Greenhill. The brothers Woodwright, sometimes Portifer and often Lucantine. Oh, and Grand Maester Pycelle is a frequent visitor."

"Pycelle? Truly?" Had that doddering old worm forsaken the lion for the rose? *If so, he will regret it.* "Who else?"

"The Summer Islander in his feathered cloak. How could I have forgotten him, with his skin as black as ink? Others come to pay court to her cousins. Elinor is promised to the Ambrose boy, but loves to flirt, and Megga has a new suitor every fortnight. Once she kissed a potboy in the kitchen. I have heard talk of her marrying Lady Bulwer's brother, but if Megga were to choose for herself, she would sooner have Mark Mullendore, I am certain."

Cersei laughed. "The butterfly knight who lost his arm on the Blackwater? What good is half a man?"

"Megga thinks him sweet. She has asked Lady Margaery to help her find a monkey for him."

"A monkey." The queen did not know what to say to that. *Sparrows and monkeys. Truly, the realm is going mad.* "What of our brave Ser Loras? How often does he call upon his sister?"

"More than any of the others." When Taena frowned, a tiny crease appeared between her dark eyes. "Every morn and every night he visits, unless duty interferes. Her brother is devoted to her, they share everything with... oh..." For a moment, the Myrish woman looked almost shocked.

Then a smile spread across her face. “I have had a most *wicked* thought, Your Grace.”

“Best keep it to yourself. The hill is thick with sparrows, and we all know how sparrows abhor wickedness.”

“I have heard they abhor soap and water too, Your Grace.”

“Perhaps too much prayer robs a man of his sense of smell. I shall be sure to ask His High Holiness.”

The draperies swayed back and forth in a wash of crimson silk. “Orton told me that the High Septon has no name,” Lady Taena said. “Can that be true? In Myr we all have names.”

“Oh, he had a name *once*. They all do.” The queen waved a hand dismissively. “Even septons born of noble blood go only by their given names once they have taken their vows. When one of them is elevated to *High* Septon, he puts aside that name as well. The Faith will tell you he no longer has any need of a man’s name, for he has become the avatar of the gods.”

“How do you distinguish one High Septon from another?”

“With difficulty. One has to say, ‘the fat one,’ or ‘the one before the fat one,’ or ‘the old one who died in his sleep.’ You can always winkle out their birth names if you like, but they take umbrage if you use them. It reminds them that they were born ordinary men, and they do not like that.”

“My lord husband tells me this new one was born with filth beneath his fingernails.”

“So I suspect. As a rule the Most Devout elevate one of their own, but there have been exceptions.” Grand Maester Pycelle had informed her of the history, at tedious length. “During the reign of King Baelor the Blessed a simple stonemason was chosen as High Septon. He worked stone so beautifully that Baelor decided he was the Smith reborn in mortal flesh. The man could neither read nor write, nor recall the words of the simplest of prayers.” Some still claimed that Baelor’s Hand had the man poisoned to spare the realm embarrassment. “After that one died, an eight-year-old boy was elevated, once more at King Baelor’s urging. The boy worked miracles,

His Grace declared, though even his little healing hands could not save Baelor during his final fast.”

Lady Merryweather gave a laugh. “Eight years old? Perhaps my son could be High Septon. He is almost seven.”

“Does he pray a lot?” the queen asked.

“He prefers to play with swords.”

“A real boy, then. Can he name all seven gods?”

“I think so.”

“I shall have to take him under consideration.” Cersei did not doubt that there were any number of boys who would do more honor to the crystal crown than the wretch on whom the Most Devout had chosen to bestow it. *This is what comes of letting fools and cowards rule themselves. Next time, I will choose their master for them.* And the next time might not be long in coming, if the new High Septon continued to annoy her. Baelor’s Hand had little to teach Cersei Lannister where such matters were concerned.

“Clear the way!” Ser Osmund Kettleblack was shouting. “Make way for the Queen’s Grace!”

The litter began to slow, which could only mean that they were near the top of the hill. “You should bring this son of yours to court,” Cersei told Lady Merryweather. “Six is not too young. Tommen needs other boys about him. Why not your son?” Joffrey had never had a close friend of his own age, that she recalled. *The poor boy was always alone. I had Jaime when I was a child... and Melara, until she fell into the well.* Joff had been fond of the Hound, to be sure, but that was not friendship. He was looking for the father he never found in Robert. *A little foster brother might be just what Tommen needs to wean him away from Margaery and her hens.* In time they might grow as close as Robert and his boyhood friend Ned Stark. *A fool, but a loyal fool. Tommen will have need of loyal friends to watch his back.*

“Your Grace is kind, but Russell has never known any home but Longtable. I fear he would be lost in this great city.”

“In the beginning,” the queen allowed, “but he will soon outgrow that, as I did. When my father sent for me to court I wept and Jaime raged, until

my aunt sat me down in the Stone Garden and told me there was no one in King's Landing that I need ever fear. 'You are a lioness,' she said, 'and it is for all the lesser beasts to fear you.' Your son will find his courage too. Surely you would prefer to have him close at hand, where you could see him every day? He is your only child, is he not?"

"For the present. My lord husband has asked the gods to bless us with another son, in case..."

"I know." She thought of Joffrey, clawing at his neck. In his last moments he had looked to her in desperate appeal, and a sudden memory had stopped her heart; a drop of red blood hissing in a candle flame, a croaking voice that spoke of crowns and shrouds, of death at the hands of the *valonqar*.

Outside the litter, Ser Osmund was shouting something, and someone was shouting back. The litter jerked to a halt. "Are you all dead?" roared Kettleblack. "*Get out of the bloody way!*"

The queen pulled back a corner of the curtain and beckoned to Ser Meryn Trant. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"The sparrows, Your Grace." Ser Meryn wore white scale armor beneath his cloak. His helm and shield were slung from his saddle. "Camping in the street. We'll make them move."

"Do that, but gently. I do not care to be caught up in another riot." Cersei let the curtain fall. "This is absurd."

"It is, Your Grace," Lady Merryweather agreed. "The High Septon should have come to you. And these wretched sparrows..."

"He feeds them, coddles them, *blesses* them. Yet will not bless the king." The blessing was an empty ritual, she knew, but rituals and ceremonies had power in the eyes of the ignorant. Aegon the Conqueror himself had dated the start of his realm from the day the High Septon anointed him in Oldtown. "This wretched priest will obey, or learn how weak and human he still is."

"Orton says it is the gold he really wants. That he means to withhold his blessing until the crown resumes its payments."

“The Faith will have its gold as soon as we have peace.” Septon Torbert and Septon Raynard had been most understanding of her plight... unlike the wretched Braavosi, who had hounded poor Lord Gyles so mercilessly that he had taken to his bed, coughing up blood. *We had to have those ships*. She could not rely upon the Arbor for her navy; the Redwynes were too close to the Tyrells. She needed her own strength at sea.

The dromonds rising on the river would give her that. Her flagship would dip twice as many oars as *King Robert's Hammer*. Aurane had asked her leave to name her *Lord Tywin*, which Cersei had been pleased to grant. She looked forward to hearing men speak of her father as a “she.” Another of the ships would be named *Sweet Cersei*, and would bear a gilded figurehead carved in her likeness, clad in mail and lion helm, with spear in hand. *Brave Joffrey*, *Lady Joanna*, and *Lioness* would follow her to sea, along with *Queen Margaery*, *Golden Rose*, *Lord Renly*, *Lady Olenna*, and *Princess Myrcella*. The queen had made the mistake of telling Tommen he might name the last five. He had actually chosen *Moon Boy* for one. Only when Lord Aurane suggested that men might not want to serve on a ship named for a fool had the boy reluctantly agreed to honor his sister instead.

“If this ragged septon thinks to make me *buy* Tommen's blessing, he will soon learn better,” she told Taena. The queen did not intend to truckle to a pack of priests.

The litter halted yet again, so suddenly that Cersei jerked. “Oh, this is infuriating.” She leaned out once more, and saw that they had reached the top of Visenya's Hill. Ahead loomed the Great Sept of Baelor, with its magnificent dome and seven shining towers, but between her and the marble steps lay a sullen sea of humanity, brown and ragged and unwashed. *Sparrows*, she thought, sniffing, though no sparrows had ever smelled so rank.

Cersei was appalled. Qyburn had brought her reports of their numbers, but hearing about them was one thing and seeing them another. Hundreds were encamped upon the plaza, hundreds more in the gardens. Their cookfires filled the air with smoke and stinks. Roughspun tents and miserable hovels made of mud and scrap wood besmirched the pristine

white marble. They were even huddled on the steps, beneath the Great Sept's towering doors.

Ser Osmund came trotting back to her. Beside him rode Ser Osfryd, mounted on a stallion as golden as his cloak. Osfryd was the middle Kettleblack, quieter than his siblings, more apt to scowl than smile. *And crueler as well, if the tales are true. Perhaps I should have sent him to the Wall.*

Grand Maester Pycelle had wanted an older man "more seasoned in the ways of war" to command the gold cloaks, and several of her other councillors had agreed with him. "Ser Osfryd is seasoned quite sufficiently," she had told them, but even that did not shut them up. *They yap at me like a pack of small, annoying dogs.* Her patience with Pycelle had all but run its course. He had even had the temerity to object to her sending to Dorne for a master-at-arms, on the grounds that it might offend the Tyrells. "Why do you think I'm *doing* it?" she had asked him scornfully.

"Beg pardon, Your Grace," said Ser Osmund. "My brother's summoning more gold cloaks. We'll clear a path, never fear."

"I do not have the time. I will continue on afoot."

"Please, Your Grace." Taena caught her arm. "They frighten me. There are hundreds of them, and so dirty."

Cersei kissed her cheek. "The lion does not fear the sparrow... but it is good of you to care. I know you love me well, my lady. Ser Osmund, kindly help me down."

*If I had known I was going to have to walk, I would have dressed for it.* She wore a white gown slashed with cloth-of-gold, lacy but demure. It had been several years since the last time she had donned it, and the queen found it uncomfortably tight about the middle. "Ser Osmund, Ser Meryn, you will accompany me. Ser Osfryd, see that my litter comes to no harm." Some of the sparrows looked gaunt and hollow-eyed enough to eat her horses.

As she made her way through the ragged throng, past their cookfires, wagons, and crude shelters, the queen found herself remembering another

crowd that had once gathered on this plaza. The day she wed Robert Baratheon, thousands had turned out to cheer for them. All the women wore their best, and half the men had children on their shoulders. When she had emerged from inside the sept, hand in hand with the young king, the crowd sent up a roar so loud it could be heard in Lannisport. "They like you well, my lady," Robert whispered in her ear. "See, every face is smiling." For that one short moment she had been happy in her marriage... until she chanced to glance at Jaime. *No*, she remembered thinking, *not every face, my lord*.

No one was smiling now. The looks the sparrows gave her were dull, sullen, hostile. They made way but reluctantly. If they were truly sparrows, a shout would send them flying. A hundred gold cloaks with staves and swords and maces could clear this rabble quick enough. That was what Lord Tywin would have done. He would have ridden over them instead of walking through.

When she saw what they had done to Baelor the Beloved, the queen had cause to rue her soft heart. The great marble statue that had smiled serenely over the plaza for a hundred years was waist-deep in a heap of bones and skulls. Some of the skulls had scraps of flesh still clinging to them. A crow sat atop one such, enjoying a dry, leathery feast. Flies were everywhere. "What is the meaning of this?" Cersei demanded of the crowd. "Do you mean to bury Blessed Baelor in a mountain of carrion?"

A one-legged man stepped forward, leaning on a wooden crutch. "Your Grace, these are the bones of holy men and women, murdered for their faith. Septons, septas, brothers brown and dun and green, sisters white and blue and grey. Some were hanged, some disemboweled. Septs have been despoiled, maidens and mothers raped by godless men and demon worshipers. Even silent sisters have been molested. The Mother Above cries out in her anguish. We have brought their bones here from all over the realm, to bear witness to the agony of the Holy Faith."

Cersei could feel the weight of eyes upon her. "The king shall know of these atrocities," she answered solemnly. "Tommen will share your outrage. This is the work of Stannis and his red witch, and the savage northmen who



worship trees and wolves.” She raised her voice. “*Good people, your dead shall be avenged!*”

A few cheered, but only a few. “We ask no vengeance for our dead,” said the one-legged man, “only protection for the living. For the septs and holy places.”

“The Iron Throne must defend the Faith,” growled a hulking lout with a seven-pointed star painted on his brow. “A king who does not protect his people is no king at all.” Murmurs of assent went up from those around him. One man had the temerity to grasp Ser Meryn by the wrist, and say, “It is time for all anointed knights to forsake their worldly masters and defend our Holy Faith. Stand with us, ser, if you love the Seven.”

“Unhand me,” said Ser Meryn, wrenching free.

“I hear you,” Cersei said. “My son is young, but he loves the Seven well. You shall have his protection, and mine own.”

The man with the star upon his brow was not appeased. “The Warrior will defend us,” he said, “not this fat boy king.”

Meryn Trant reached for his sword, but Cersei stopped him before he could unsheathe it. She had only two knights amidst a sea of sparrows. She saw staves and scythes, cudgels and clubs, several axes. “I will have no blood shed in this holy place, ser.” *Why are all men such children? Cut him down, and the rest will tear us limb from limb.* “We are all the Mother’s children. Come, His High Holiness awaits us.” But as she made her way through the press to the steps of the sept, a gaggle of armed men stepped out to block the doors. They wore mail and boiled leather, with here and there a bit of dented plate. Some had spears and some had longswords. More favored axes, and had sewn red stars upon their bleached white surcoats. Two had the insolence to cross their spears and bar her way.

“Is this how you receive your queen?” she demanded of them. “Pray, where are Raynard and Torbert?” It was not like those two to miss a chance to fawn on her. Torbert always made a show of getting down on his knees to wash her feet.

“I do not know the men you speak of,” said one of the men with a red star on his surcoat, “but if they are of the Faith, no doubt the Seven had need of their service.”

“Septon Raynard and Septon Torbert are of the *Most Devout*,” Cersei said, “and will be furious to learn that you obstructed me. Do you mean to deny me entrance to Baelor’s holy sept?”

“Your Grace,” said a greybeard with a stooped shoulder. “You are welcome here, but your men must leave their swordbelts. No weapons are allowed within, by command of the High Septon.”

“Knights of the Kingsguard do not set aside their swords, not even in the presence of the king.”

“In the king’s house, the king’s word must rule,” replied the aged knight, “but this is the house of the gods.”

Color rose to her cheeks. One word to Meryn Trant, and the stoop-backed greybeard would be meeting his gods sooner than he might have liked. *Not here, though. Not now.* “Wait for me,” she told the Kingsguard curtly. Alone, she climbed the steps. The spearmen uncrossed their spears. Two other men put their weight against the doors, and with a great groan they swung apart.

In the Hall of Lamps, Cersei found a score of septs on their knees, but not in prayer. They had pails of soap and water, and were scrubbing at the floor. Their roughspun robes and sandals led Cersei to take them for sparrows, until one raised his head. His face was red as a beet, and there were broken blisters on his hands, bleeding. “Your Grace.”

“Septon Raynard?” The queen could scarce believe what she was seeing. “What are you doing on your knees?”

“He is cleaning the floor.” The speaker was shorter than the queen by several inches and as thin as a broom handle. “Work is a form of prayer, most pleasing to the Smith.” He stood, scrub brush in hand. “Your Grace. We have been expecting you.”

The man’s beard was grey and brown and closely trimmed, his hair tied up in a hard knot behind his head. Though his robes were clean, they were

frayed and patched as well. He had rolled his sleeves up his elbows as he scrubbed, but below the knees the cloth was soaked and sodden. His face was sharply pointed, with deep-set eyes as brown as mud. *His feet are bare*, she saw with dismay. They were hideous as well, hard and horny things, thick with callus. “You are His High Holiness?”

“We are.”

*Father, give me strength.* The queen knew that she should kneel, but the floor was wet with soap and dirty water and she did not wish to ruin her gown. She glanced over at the old men on their knees. “I do not see my friend Septon Torbert.”

“Septon Torbert has been confined to a penitent’s cell on bread and water. It is sinful for any man to be so plump when half the realm is starving.”

Cersei had suffered quite enough for one day. She let him see her anger. “Is this how you greet me? With a scrub brush in your hand, dripping water? Do you know who I am?”

“Your Grace is the Queen Regent of the Seven Kingdoms,” the man said, “but in *The Seven-Pointed Star* it is written that as men bow to their lords, and lords to their kings, so kings and queens must bow before the Seven Who Are One.”

*Is he telling me to kneel?* If so, he did not know her very well. “By rights you should have met me on the steps in your finest robes, with the crystal crown upon your head.”

“We have no crown, Your Grace.”

Her frown deepened. “My lord father gave your predecessor a crown of rare beauty, wrought in crystal and spun gold.”

“And for that gift we honor him in our prayers,” the High Septon said, “but the poor need food in their bellies more than we need gold and crystal on our head. That crown has been sold. So have the others in our vaults, and all our rings, and our robes of cloth-of-gold and cloth-of-silver. Wool will keep a man as warm. That is why the Seven gave us sheep.”

*He is utterly mad.* The Most Devout must have been mad as well, to elevate this creature... mad, or terrified of the beggars at their doors. Qyburn's whisperers claimed that Septon Luceon had been nine votes from elevation when those doors had given way, and the sparrows came pouring into the Great Sept with their leader on their shoulders and their axes in their hands.

She fixed the small man with an icy stare. "Is there someplace where we may speak more privily, Your Holiness?"

The High Septon surrendered his scrub brush to one of the Most Devout. "If Your Grace will follow us?"

He led her through the inner doors, into the sept proper. Their footsteps echoed off the marble floor. Dust motes swam in the beams of colored light slanting down through the leaded glass of the great dome. Incense sweetened the air, and beside the seven altars candles shone like stars. A thousand twinkled for the Mother and near as many for the Maid, but you could count the Stranger's candles on two hands and still have fingers left.

Even here the sparrows had invaded. A dozen scruffy hedge knights were kneeling before the Warrior, beseeching him to bless the swords they had piled at his feet. At the Mother's altar, a septon was leading a hundred sparrows in prayer, their voices as distant as waves upon the shore. The High Septon led Cersei to where the Crone raised her lantern. When he knelt before the altar, she had no choice but to kneel beside him. Mercifully, this High Septon was not as long-winded as the fat one had been. *I should be grateful for that much, I suppose.*

His High Holiness made no move to rise when his prayer was done. It would seem they must confer upon their knees. *A small man's ploy*, she thought, amused. "High Holiness," she said, "these sparrows are frightening the city. I want them gone."

"Where should they go, Your Grace?"

There are seven hells, any one of them will serve. "Back where they came from, I would imagine."

“They came from everywhere. As the sparrow is the humblest and most common of the birds, they are the humblest and most common of men.”

*They are common, we agree on that much.* “Have you seen what they have done to Blessed Baelor’s statue? They befoul the plaza with their pigs and goats and night soil.”

“Night soil can be washed away more easily than blood, Your Grace. If the plaza was befouled, it was befouled by the execution that was done here.”

*He dares throw Ned Stark in my face?* “We all regret that. Joffrey was young, and not as wise as he might have been. Lord Stark should have been beheaded elsewhere, out of respect for Blessed Baelor... but the man *was* a traitor, let us not forget.”

“King Baelor forgave those who conspired against him.”

King Baelor imprisoned his own sisters, whose only crime was being beautiful. The first time Cersei heard that tale, she had gone to Tyrion’s nursery and pinched the little monster till he cried. I should have pinched his nose shut and stuffed my sock into his mouth. She forced herself to smile. “King Tommen will forgive the sparrows too, once they have returned to their homes.”

“Most have lost their homes. Suffering is everywhere... and grief, and death. Before coming to King’s Landing, I tended to half a hundred little villages too small to have a septon of their own. I walked from each one to the next, performing marriages, absolving sinners of their sins, naming newborn children. Those villages are no more, Your Grace. Weeds and thorns grow where gardens once flourished, and bones litter the roadsides.”

“War is a dreadful thing. These atrocities are the work of the northmen, and of Lord Stannis and his demon-worshippers.”

“Some of my sparrows speak of bands of lions who despoiled them... and of the Hound, who was your own sworn man. At Saltpans he slew an aged septon and despoiled a girl of twelve, an innocent child promised to the Faith. He wore his armor as he raped her and her tender flesh was torn

and crushed by his iron mail. When he was done he gave her to his men, who cut off her nose and nipples.”

“His Grace cannot be held responsible for the crimes of every man who ever served House Lannister. Sandor Clegane is a traitor and a brute. Why do you think I dismissed him from our service? He fights for the outlaw Beric Dondarrion now, not for King Tommen.”

“As you say. Yet it must be asked—where were the king’s knights when these things were being done? Did not Jaehaerys the Conciliator once swear upon the Iron Throne itself that the crown would always protect and defend the Faith?”

Cersei had no idea what Jaehaerys the Conciliator might have sworn. “He did,” she agreed, “and the High Septon blessed him and anointed him as king. It is traditional for every new High Septon to give the king his blessing... and yet you have refused to bless King Tommen.”

“Your Grace is mistaken. We have not refused.”

“You have not come.”

“The hour is not yet ripe.”

Are you a priest or a greengrocer? “And what might I do to make it... riper?” If he dares mention gold, I will deal with this one as I did the last and find a pious eight-year-old to wear the crystal crown.

“The realm is full of kings. For the Faith to exalt one above the rest we must be certain. Three hundred years ago, when Aegon the Dragon landed beneath this very hill, the High Septon locked himself within the Starry Sept of Oldtown and prayed for seven days and seven nights, taking no nourishment but bread and water. When he emerged he announced that the Faith would not oppose Aegon and his sisters, for the Crone had lifted up her lamp to show him what lay ahead. If Oldtown took up arms against the Dragon, Oldtown would burn, and the Hightower and the Citadel and the Starry Sept would be cast down and destroyed. Lord Hightower was a godly man. When he heard the prophecy, he kept his strength at home and opened the city gates to Aegon when he came. And His High Holiness anointed the

Conqueror with the seven oils. I must do as he did, three hundred years ago. I must pray, and fast.”

“For seven days and seven nights?”

“For as long as need be.”

Cersei itched to slap his solemn, pious face. *I could help you fast*, she thought. *I could shut you up in some tower and see that no one brings you food until the gods have spoken.* “These false kings espouse false gods,” she reminded him. “Only King Tommen defends the Holy Faith.”

“Yet everywhere septs are burned and looted. Even silent sisters have been raped, crying their anguish to the sky. Your Grace has seen the bones and skulls of our holy dead?”

“I have,” she had to say. “Give Tommen your blessing, and he shall put an end to these outrages.”

“And how shall he do that, Your Grace? Will he send a knight to walk the roads with every begging brother? Will he give us men to guard our septas against the wolves and lions?”

*I will pretend you did not mention lions.* “The realm is at war. His Grace has need of every man.” Cersei did not intend to squander Tommen’s strength playing wet nurse to sparrows, or guarding the wrinkled cunts of a thousand sour septas. *Half of them are probably praying for a good raping.* “Your sparrows have clubs and axes. Let them defend themselves.”

“King Maegor’s laws prohibit that, as Your Grace must know. It was by his decree that the Faith laid down its swords.”

“Tommen is king now, not Maegor.” What did she care what Maegor the Cruel had decreed three hundred years ago? *Instead of taking the swords out of the hands of the faithful, he should have used them for his own ends.* She pointed to where the Warrior stood above his altar of red marble. “What is that he holds?”

“A sword.”

“Has he forgotten how to use it?”

“Maegor’s laws—”

“—could be undone.” She let that hang there, waiting for the High Sparrow to rise to the bait.

He did not disappoint her. “The Faith Militant reborn... that would be the answer to three hundred years of prayer, Your Grace. The Warrior would lift his shining sword again and cleanse this sinful realm of all its evil. If His Grace were to allow me to restore the ancient blessed orders of the Sword and Star, every godly man in the Seven Kingdoms would know him to be our true and rightful lord.”

That was sweet to hear, but Cersei took care not to seem too eager. “Your High Holiness spoke of forgiveness earlier. In these troubled times, King Tommen would be most grateful if you could see your way to forgiving the crown’s debt. It seems to me we owe the Faith some nine hundred thousand dragons.”

“Nine hundred thousand six hundred and seventy-four dragons. Gold that could feed the hungry and rebuild a thousand septs.”

“Is it gold you want?” the queen asked. “Or do you want these dusty laws of Maegor’s set aside?”

The High Septon pondered that a moment. “As you wish. This debt shall be forgiven, and King Tommen will have his blessing. The Warrior’s Sons shall escort me to him, shining in the glory of their Faith, whilst my sparrows go forth to defend the meek and humble of the land, reborn as Poor Fellows as of old.”

The queen got to her feet and smoothed her skirts. “I shall have the papers drawn up, and His Grace will sign them and affix them with the royal seal.” If there was one part of kingship that Tommen loved, it was playing with his seal.

“Seven save His Grace. Long may he reign.” The High Septon made a steeple of his hands and raised his eyes to heaven. “Let the wicked tremble!”

*Do you hear that, Lord Stannis?* Cersei could not help but smile. Even her lord father could have done no better. At a stroke, she had rid King’s Landing of the plague of sparrows, secured Tommen’s blessing, and



lessened the crown's debt by close to a million dragons. Her heart was soaring as she allowed the High Septon to escort her back to the Hall of Lamps.

Lady Merryweather shared the queen's delight, though she had never heard of the Warrior's Sons or the Poor Fellows. "They date from before Aegon's Conquest," Cersei explained to her. "The Warrior's Sons were an order of knights who gave up their lands and gold and swore their swords to His High Holiness. The Poor Fellows... they were humbler, though far more numerous. Begging brothers of a sort, though they carried axes instead of bowls. They wandered the roads, escorting travelers from sept to sept and town to town. Their badge was the seven-pointed star, red on white, so the smallfolk named them Stars. The Warrior's Sons wore rainbow cloaks and inlaid silver armor over hair shirts, and bore star-shaped crystals in the pommels of their longswords. They were the Swords. Holy men, ascetics, fanatics, sorcerers, dragonslayers, demonhunters... there were many tales about them. But all agree that they were implacable in their hatred for all enemies of the Holy Faith."

Lady Merryweather understood at once. "Enemies such as Lord Stannis and his red sorceress, perhaps?"

"Why, yes, as it happens," said Cersei, giggling like a girl. "Shall we broach a flagon of hippocras and drink to the fervor of the Warrior's Sons on our way home?"

"To the fervor of the Warrior's Sons and the brilliance of the Queen Regent. To Cersei, the First of Her Name!"

The hippocras was as sweet and savory as Cersei's triumph, and the queen's litter seemed almost to float back across the city. But at the base of Aegon's High Hill, they encountered Margaery Tyrell and her cousins returning from a ride. *She dogs me everywhere I go*, Cersei thought with annoyance when she laid eyes on the little queen.

Behind Margaery came a long tail of courtiers, guards, and servants, many of them laden with baskets of fresh flowers. Each of her cousins had an admirer in thrall; the gangly squire Alyn Ambrose rode with Elinor, to whom he was betrothed, Ser Tallad with shy Alla, one-armed Mark Mullendore with Megga, plump and laughing. The Redwyne twins were

escorting two of Margaery's other ladies, Meredyth Crane and Janna Fossoway. The women all wore flowers in their hair. Jalabhar Xho had attached himself to the party too, as had Ser Lambert Turnberry with his eye patch, and the handsome singer known as the Blue Bard.

*And of course a knight of the Kingsguard must accompany the little queen, and of course it is the Knight of Flowers.* In white scale armor chased with gold, Ser Loras glittered. Though he no longer presumed to train Tommen at arms, the king still spent far too much time in his company. Every time the boy returned from an afternoon with his little wife, he had some new tale to tell about something that Ser Loras had said or done.

Margaery hailed them when the two columns met and fell in beside the queen's litter. Her cheeks were flushed, her brown ringlets tumbling loosely about her shoulders, stirred by every puff of wind. "We have been picking autumn flowers in the kingswood," she told them.

*I know where you were,* the queen thought. Her informers were very good about keeping her apprised of Margaery's movements. *Such a restless girl, our little queen.* She seldom let more than three days pass without going off for a ride. Some days they would ride along the Rosby road to hunt for shells and eat beside the sea. Other times she would take her entourage across the river for an afternoon of hawking. The little queen was fond of going out on boats as well, sailing up and down the Blackwater Rush to no particular purpose. When she was feeling pious she would leave the castle to pray at Baelor's Sept. She gave her custom to a dozen different seamstresses, was well-known amongst the city's goldsmiths, and had even been known to visit the fish market by the Mud Gate for a look at the day's catch. Wherever she went, the smallfolk fawned on her, and Lady Margaery did all she could to fan their ardor. She was forever giving alms to beggars, buying hot pies off bakers' carts, and reining up to speak to common tradesmen.

Had it been up to her, she would have had Tommen doing all these things as well. She was forever inviting him to accompany her and her hens on their adventures, and the boy was forever pleading with his mother for

leave to go along. The queen had given her consent a few times, if only to allow Ser Osney to spend a few more hours in Margaery's company. *For all the good it has done. Osney has proved a grievous disappointment.* "Do you remember the day your sister sailed for Dorne?" Cersei asked her son. "Do you recall the mob howling on our way back to the castle? The stones, the curses?"

But the king was deaf to sense, thanks to his little queen. "If we mingle with the commons, they will love us better."

"The mob loved the fat High Septon so well they tore him limb from limb, and him a holy man," she reminded him. All it did was make him sullen with her. *Just as Margaery wants, I wager. Every day in every way she tries to steal him from me.* Joffrey would have seen through her schemer's smile and let her know her place, but Tommen was more gullible. *She knew Joff was too strong for her,* Cersei thought, remembering the gold coin Qyburn had found. *For House Tyrell to hope to rule, he had to be removed.* It came back to her that Margaery and her hideous grandmother had once plotted to marry Sansa Stark to the little queen's crippled brother Willas. Lord Tywin had forestalled that by stealing a march on them and wedding Sansa to Tyrion, but the link had been there. *They are all in it together,* she realized with a start. *The Tyrells bribed the gaolers to free Tyrion, and whisked him down the roseroad to join his vile bride. By now the both of them are safe in Highgarden, hidden away behind a wall of roses.*

"You should have come along with us, Your Grace," the little schemer prattled on as they climbed the slope of Aegon's High Hill. "We could have had such a lovely time together. The trees are gowned in gold and red and orange, and there are flowers everywhere. Chestnuts too. We roasted some on our way home."

"I have no time for riding through the woods and picking flowers," Cersei said. "I have a kingdom to rule."

"Only one, Your Grace? Who rules the other six?" Margaery laughed a merry little laugh. "You will forgive me my jest, I hope. I know what a burden you bear. You should let me share the load. There must be some

things I could do to help you. It would put to rest all this talk that you and I are rivals for the king.”

“Is that what they say?” Cersei smiled. “How foolish. I have never looked upon you as a rival, not even for a moment.”

“I am so pleased to hear that.” The girl did not seem to realize that she had been cut. “You and Tommen must come with us the next time. I know His Grace would love it. The Blue Bard played for us, and Ser Tallad showed us how to fight with a staff the way the smallfolk do. The woods are so beautiful in autumn.”

“My late husband loved the forest too.” In the early years of their marriage, Robert was forever imploring her to hunt with him, but Cersei had always begged off. His hunting trips allowed her time with Jaime. *Golden days and silver nights*. It was a dangerous dance that they had danced, to be sure. Eyes and ears were everywhere within the Red Keep, and one could never be certain when Robert would return. Somehow the peril had only served to make their times together that much more thrilling. “Still, beauty can sometimes mask deadly danger,” she warned the little queen. “Robert lost his life in the woods.”

Margaery smiled at Ser Loras; a sweet sisterly smile, full of fondness. “Your Grace is kind to fear for me, but my brother keeps me well protected.”

*Go and hunt*, Cersei had urged Robert, half a hundred times. *My brother keeps me well protected*. She recalled what Taena had told her earlier, and a laugh came bursting from her lips.

“Your Grace laughs so prettily.” Lady Margaery gave her a quizzical smile. “Might we share the jest?”

“You will,” the queen said. “I promise you, you will.”