

CERSEI

She dreamt she sat the Iron Throne, high above them all.

The courtiers were brightly colored mice below. Great lords and proud ladies knelt before her. Bold young knights laid their swords at her feet and pleaded for her favors, and the queen smiled down at them. Until the dwarf appeared as if from nowhere, pointing at her and howling with laughter. The lords and ladies began to chuckle too, hiding their smiles behind their hands. Only then did the queen realize she was naked.

Horried, she tried to cover herself with her hands. The barbs and blades of the Iron Throne bit into her flesh as she crouched to hide her shame. Blood ran red down her legs, as steel teeth gnawed at her buttocks. When she tried to stand, her foot slipped through a gap in the twisted metal. The more she struggled the more the throne engulfed her, tearing chunks of flesh from her breasts and belly, slicing at her arms and legs until they were slick and red, glistening.

And all the while her brother capered below, laughing.

His merriment still echoed in her ears when she felt a light touch on her shoulder, and woke suddenly. For half a heartbeat the hand seemed part of the nightmare, and Cersei cried out, but it was only Senelle. The maid's face was white and frightened.

We are not alone, the queen realized. Shadows loomed around her bed, tall shapes with chainmail glimmering beneath their cloaks. Armed men had no business here. *Where are my guards?* Her bedchamber was dark, but for the lantern one of the intruders held on high. *I must show no fear*. Cersei pushed back sleep-tousled hair, and said, "What do you want of me?" A man stepped into the lantern light, and she saw his cloak was white. "Jaime?" *I dreamt of one brother, but the other has come to wake me.*

"Your Grace." The voice was not her brother's. "The Lord Commander said come get you." His hair curled, as Jaime's did, but her brother's hair was beaten gold, like hers, where this man's was black and oily. She stared

at him, confused, as he muttered about a privy and a crossbow, and said her father's name. *I am dreaming still*, Cersei thought. *I have not woken, nor has my nightmare ended. Tyrion will creep out from under the bed soon and begin to laugh at me.*

But that was folly. Her dwarf brother was down in the black cells, condemned to die this very day. She looked down at her hands, turning them over to make certain all her fingers were still there. When she ran a hand down her arm the skin was covered with gooseprickles, but unbroken. There were no cuts on her legs, no gashes on the soles of her feet. *A dream, that's all it was, a dream. I drank too much last night, these fears are only humors born of wine. I will be the one laughing, come dusk. My children will be safe, Tommen's throne will be secure, and my twisted little valonqar will be short a head and rotting.*

Jocelyn Swyft was at her elbow, pressing a cup on her. Cersei took a sip: water, mixed with lemon squeezings, so tart she spit it out. She could hear the night wind rattling the shutters, and she saw with a strange sharp clarity. Jocelyn was trembling like a leaf, as frightened as Senelle. Ser Osmund Kettleblack loomed over her. Behind him stood Ser Boros Blount, with a lantern. At the door were Lannister guardsmen with gilded lions shining on the crests of their helmets. They looked afraid as well. *Can it be?* the queen wondered. *Can it be true?*

She rose, and let Senelle slip a bedrobe over her shoulders to hide her nakedness. Cersei belted it herself, her fingers stiff and clumsy. "My lord father keeps guards about him, night and day," she said. Her tongue felt thick. She took another swallow of lemon water and sloshed it round her mouth to freshen her breath. A moth had gotten into the lantern Ser Boros was holding; she could hear it buzzing and see the shadow of its wings as it beat against the glass.

"The guards were at their posts, Your Grace," said Osmund Kettleblack. "We found a hidden door behind the hearth. A secret passage. The Lord Commander's gone down to see where it goes."

"Jaime?" Terror seized her, sudden as a storm. "Jaime should be with the *king*..."

“The lad’s not been harmed. Ser Jaime sent a dozen men to look in on him. His Grace is sleeping peaceful.”

Let him have a sweeter dream than mine, and a kinder waking. “Who is with the king?”

“Ser Loras has that honor, if it please you.”

It did not please her. The Tyrells were only stewards that the dragon-kings had upjumped far above their station. Their vanity was exceeded only by their ambition. Ser Loras might be as pretty as a maiden’s dream, but underneath his white cloak he was Tyrell to the bone. For all she knew, this night’s foul fruit had been planted and nurtured in Highgarden.

But that was a suspicion she dare not speak aloud. “Allow me a moment to dress. Ser Osmund, you shall accompany me to the Tower of the Hand. Ser Boros, roust the gaolers and make certain the dwarf is still in his cell.” She would not say his name. *He would never have found the courage to lift a hand against Father*, she told herself, but she had to be certain.

“As Your Grace commands.” Blount surrendered the lantern to Ser Osmund. Cersei was not displeased to see the back of him. *Father should never have restored him to the white*. The man had proved himself a craven.

By the time they left Maegor’s Holdfast, the sky had turned a deep cobalt blue, though the stars still shone. *All but one*, Cersei thought. *The bright star of the west has fallen, and the nights will be darker now*. She paused upon the drawbridge that spanned the dry moat, gazing down at the spikes below. *They would not dare lie to me about such a thing*. “Who found him?”

“One of his guards,” said Ser Osmund. “Lum. He felt a call of nature, and found his lordship in the privy.”

No, that cannot be. That is not the way a lion dies. The queen felt strangely calm. She remembered the first time she had lost a tooth, when she was just a little girl. It hadn’t hurt, but the hole in her mouth felt so odd she could not stop touching it with her tongue. *Now there is a hole in the world where Father stood, and holes want filling*.

If Tywin Lannister was truly dead, no one was safe... least of all her son upon his throne. When the lion falls the lesser beasts move in: the jackals and the vultures and the feral dogs. They would try to push her aside, as they always had. She would need to move quickly, as she had when Robert died. This might be the work of Stannis Baratheon, through some catspaw. It could well be the prelude to another attack upon the city. She hoped it was. *Let him come. I will smash him, just as Father did, and this time he will die.* Stannis did not frighten her, no more than Mace Tyrell did. No one frightened her. She was a daughter of the Rock, a lion. *There will be no more talk of forcing me to wed again.* Casterly Rock was hers now, and all the power of House Lannister. No one would ever disregard her again. Even when Tommen had no further need of a regent, the Lady of Casterly Rock would remain a power in the land.

The rising sun had painted the tower tops a vivid red, but beneath the walls the night still huddled. The outer castle was so hushed that she could have believed all its people dead. *They should be. It is not fitting for Tywin Lannister to die alone. Such a man deserves a retinue to attend his needs in hell.*

Four spearmen in red cloaks and lion-crested helms were posted at the door of the Tower of the Hand. "No one is to enter or leave without my permission," she told them. The command came easily to her. *My father had steel in his voice as well.*

Within the tower, the smoke from the torches irritated her eyes, but Cersei did not weep, no more than her father would have. *I am the only true son he ever had.* Her heels scraped against the stone as she climbed, and she could still hear the moth fluttering wildly inside Ser Osmund's lantern. *Die,* the queen thought at it, in irritation, *fly into the flame and be done with it.*

Two more red-cloaked guardsmen stood atop the steps. Red Lester muttered a condolence as she passed. The queen's breath was coming fast and short, and she could feel her heart fluttering in her chest. *The steps,* she told herself, *this cursed tower has too many steps.* She had half a mind to tear it down.

The hall was full of fools speaking in whispers, as if Lord Tywin were asleep and they were afraid to wake him. Guards and servants alike shrank back before her, mouths flapping. She saw their pink gums and wagging tongues, but their words made no more sense than the buzzing of the moth. *What are they doing here? How did they know?* By rights they should have called her first. She was the Queen Regent, had they forgotten that?

Before the Hand's bedchamber stood Ser Meryn Trant in his white armor and cloak. The visor of his helm was open, and the bags beneath his eyes made him look still half-asleep. "Clear these people away," Cersei told him. "Is my father in the privy?"

"They carried him back to his bed, m'lady." Ser Meryn pushed the door open for her to enter.

Morning light slashed through the shutters to paint golden bars upon the rushes strewn across the floor of the bedchamber. Her uncle Kevan was on his knees beside the bed, trying to pray, but he could scarcely get the words out. Guardsmen clustered near the hearth. The secret door that Ser Osmund had spoken of gaped open behind the ashes, no bigger than an oven. A man would need to crawl. *But Tyrion is only half a man.* The thought made her angry. *No, the dwarf is locked in a black cell.* This could not be his work. *Stannis, she told herself, Stannis was behind it. He still has adherents in the city. Him, or the Tyrells...*

There had always been talk of secret passages within the Red Keep. Maegor the Cruel was supposed to have killed the men who built the castle to keep the knowledge of them secret. *How many other bedchambers have hidden doors?* Cersei had a sudden vision of the dwarf crawling out from behind a tapestry in Tommen's bedchamber with blade in hand. *Tommen is well guarded,* she told herself. But Lord Tywin had been well guarded too.

For a moment she did not recognize the dead man. He had hair like her father, yes, but this was some other man, surely, a smaller man, and much older. His bedrobe was hiked up around his chest, leaving him naked below the waist. The quarrel had taken him in his groin between his navel and his manhood, and was sunk so deep that only the fletching showed. His pubic hair was stiff with dried blood. More was congealing in his navel.

The smell of him made her wrinkle her nose. "Take the quarrel out of him," she commanded. "This is the King's Hand!" *And my father. My lord father. Should I scream and tear my hair?* They said Catelyn Stark had clawed her own face to bloody ribbons when the Freys slew her precious Robb. *Would you like that, Father?* she wanted to ask him. *Or would you want me to be strong? Did you weep for your own father?* Her grandfather had died when she was only a year old, but she knew the story. Lord Tytos had grown very fat, and his heart burst one day when he was climbing the steps to his mistress. Her father was off in King's Landing when it happened, serving as the Mad King's Hand. Lord Tywin was often away in King's Landing when she and Jaime were young. If he wept when they brought him word of his father's death, he did it where no one could see the tears.

The queen could feel her nails digging into her palms. "How could you leave him like this? My father was Hand to three kings, as great a man as ever strode the Seven Kingdoms. The bells must ring for him, as they rang for Robert. He must be bathed and dressed as befits his stature, in ermine and cloth-of-gold and crimson silk. Where is Pycelle? *Where is Pycelle?*" She turned to the guardsmen. "Puckens, bring Grand Maester Pycelle. He must see to Lord Tywin."

"He's seen him, Your Grace," said Puckens. "He came and saw and went, to summon the silent sisters."

They sent for me last. The realization made her almost too angry for words. *And Pycelle runs off to send a message rather than soil his soft, wrinkled hands. The man is useless.* "Find Maester Ballabar," she commanded. "Find Maester Frenken. Any of them." Puckens and Shortear ran to obey. "Where is my brother?"

"Down the tunnel. There's a shaft, with iron rungs set in the stone. Ser Jaime went to see how deep it goes."

He has only one hand, she wanted to shout at them. One of you should have gone. He has no business climbing ladders. The men who murdered Father might be down there, waiting for him. Her twin had always been too rash, and it would seem that even losing a hand had not taught him caution.

She was about to command the guards to go down after him and bring him back when Puckens and Shortear returned with a grey-haired man between them. “Your Grace,” said Shortear, “this here claims he was a maester.”

The man bowed low. “How may I serve Your Grace?”

His face was vaguely familiar, though Cersei could not place him. *Old, but not so old as Pycelle. This one has some strength in him still.* He was tall, though slightly stooped, with crinkles around his bold blue eyes. *His throat is naked.* “You wear no maester’s chain.”

“It was taken from me. My name is Qyburn, if it please Your Grace. I treated your brother’s hand.”

“His stump, you mean.” She remembered him now. He had come with Jaime from Harrenhal.

“I could not save Ser Jaime’s hand, it is true. My arts saved his arm, however, mayhaps his very life. The Citadel took my chain, but they could not take my knowledge.”

“You may suffice,” she decided. “If you fail me you will lose more than a chain, I promise you. Remove the quarrel from my father’s belly and make him ready for the silent sisters.”

“As my queen commands.” Qyburn went to the bedside, paused, looked back. “And how shall I deal with the girl, Your Grace?”

“Girl?” Cersei had overlooked the second body. She strode to the bed, flung aside the heap of bloody coverlets, and there she was, naked, cold, and pink... save for her face, which had turned as black as Joff’s had at his wedding feast. A chain of linked golden hands was half-buried in the flesh of her throat, twisted so tight that it had broken the skin. Cersei hissed like an angry cat. “What is *she* doing here?”

“We found her there, Your Grace,” said Shortear. “It’s the Imp’s whore.” As if that explained why she was here.

My lord father had no use for whores, she thought. After our mother died he never touched a woman. She gave the guardsman a chilly look. “This is not... when Lord Tywin’s father died he returned to Casterly Rock to find a... a woman of this sort... bedecked in his lady mother’s jewels,

wearing one of her gowns. He stripped them off her, and all else as well. For a fortnight she was paraded naked through the streets of Lannisport, to confess to every man she met that she was a thief and a harlot. That was how Lord Tywin Lannister dealt with whores. He never... this woman was here for some other purpose, not for..."

"Perhaps his lordship was questioning the girl about her mistress," Qyburn suggested. "Sansa Stark vanished the night the king was murdered, I have heard."

"That's so." Cersei seized on the suggestion eagerly. "He was questioning her, to be sure. There can be no doubt." She could see Tyrion leering, his mouth twisted into a monkey's grin beneath the ruin of his nose. *And what better way to question her than naked, with her legs well spread?* the dwarf whispered. *That's how I like to question her too.*

The queen turned away. *I will not look at her.* Suddenly it was too much even to be in the same room as the dead woman. She pushed past Qyburn, out into the hall.

Ser Osmund had been joined by his brothers Osney and Osfryd. "There is a dead woman in the Hand's bedchamber," Cersei told the three Kettleblacks. "No one is ever to know that she was here."

"Aye, m'lady." Ser Osney had faint scratches on his cheek where another of Tyrion's whores had clawed him. "And what shall we do with her?"

"Feed her to your dogs. Keep her for a bedmate. What do I care? *She was never here.* I'll have the tongue of any man who dares to say she was. Do you understand me?"

Osney and Osfryd exchanged a look. "Aye, Your Grace."

She followed them back inside and watched as they bundled the girl up in her father's bloody blankets. *Shae, her name was Shae.* They had last spoken the night before the dwarf's trial by combat, after that smiling Dornish snake offered to champion him. Shae had been asking about some jewels Tyrion had given her, and certain promises Cersei might have made, a manse in the city and a knight to marry her. The queen made it plain that

the whore would have nothing of her until she told them where Sansa Stark had gone. “You were her maid. Do you expect me to believe that you knew nothing of her plans?” she had said. Shae left in tears.

Ser Osfryd slung the bundled corpse up over his shoulder. “I want that chain,” Cersei said. “See that you do not scratch the gold.” Osfryd nodded and started toward the door. “No, not through the yard.” She gestured toward the secret passage. “There’s a shaft down to the dungeons. That way.”

As Ser Osfryd went down on one knee before the hearth, the light brightened within, and the queen heard noises. Jaime emerged bent over like an old woman, his boots kicking up puffs of soot from Lord Tywin’s last fire. “Get out of my way,” he told the Kettleblacks.

Cersei rushed toward him. “Did you find them? Did you find the killers? How many were there?” Surely there had been more than one. One man alone could not have killed her father.

Her twin’s face had a haggard look. “The shaft goes down to a chamber where half a dozen tunnels meet. They’re closed off by iron gates, chained and locked. I need to find keys.” He glanced around the bedchamber. “Whoever did this might still be lurking in the walls. It’s a maze back there, and dark.”

She imagined Tyrion creeping between the walls like some monstrous rat. *No. You are being silly. The dwarf is in his cell.* “Take hammers to the walls. Knock this tower down, if you must. I want them found. Whoever did this. I want them killed.”

Jaime hugged her, his good hand pressing against the small of her back. He smelled of ash, but the morning sun was in his hair, giving it a golden glow. She wanted to draw his face to hers for a kiss. *Later, she told herself, later he will come to me, for comfort.* “We are his heirs, Jaime,” she whispered. “It will be up to us to finish his work. You must take Father’s place as Hand. You see that now, surely. Tommen will need you...”

He pushed away from her and raised his arm, forcing his stump into her face. “A Hand without a hand? A bad jape, sister. Don’t ask me to rule.”

Their uncle heard the rebuff. Qyburn as well, and the Kettleblacks, wrestling their bundle through the ashes. Even the guardsmen heard, Puckens and Hoke the Horseleg and Shortear. *It will be all over the castle by nightfall.* Cersei felt the heat rising up her cheeks. “Rule? I said naught of ruling. I shall rule until my son comes of age.”

“I don’t know who I pity more,” her brother said. “Tommen, or the Seven Kingdoms.”

She slapped him. Jaime’s arm rose to catch the blow, cat-quick... but this cat had a cripple’s stump in place of a right hand. Her fingers left red marks on his cheek.

The sound brought their uncle to his feet. “Your father lies here *dead*. Have the decency to take your quarrel outside.”

Jaime inclined his head in apology. “Forgive us, Uncle. My sister is sick with grief. She forgets herself.”

She wanted to slap him again for that. *I must have been mad to think he could be Hand.* She would sooner abolish the office. When had a Hand ever brought her anything but grief? Jon Arryn put Robert Baratheon in her bed, and before he died he’d begun sniffing about her and Jaime as well. Eddard Stark took up right where Arryn had left off; his meddling had forced her to rid herself of Robert sooner than she would have liked, before she could deal with his pestilential brothers. Tyrion sold Myrcella to the Dornishmen, made one of her sons his hostage, and murdered the other. And when Lord Tywin returned to King’s Landing...

The next Hand will know his place, she promised herself. It would have to be Ser Kevan. Her uncle was tireless, prudent, unfailingly obedient. She could rely on him, as her father had. *The hand does not argue with the head.* She had a realm to rule, but she would need new men to help her rule it. Pycelle was a doddering lickspittle, Jaime had lost his courage with his sword hand, and Mace Tyrell and his cronies Redwyne and Rowan could not be trusted. For all she knew they might have had a part in this. Lord Tyrell had to know that he would never rule the Seven Kingdoms so long as Tywin Lannister lived.

I will need to move carefully with that one. The city was full of his men, and he'd even managed to plant one of his sons in the Kingsguard, and meant to plant his daughter in Tommen's bed. It still made her furious to think that Father had agreed to betroth Tommen to Margaery Tyrell. *The girl is twice his age and twice widowed.* Mace Tyrell claimed his daughter was still virgin, but Cersei had her doubts. Joffrey had been murdered before he could bed the girl, but she had been wed to Renly first... *A man may prefer the taste of hippocras, yet if you set a tankard of ale before him, he will quaff it quick enough.* She must command Lord Varys to find out what he could.

That stopped her where she stood. She had forgotten about Varys. *He should be here. He is always here.* Whenever anything of import happened in the Red Keep, the eunuch appeared as if from nowhere. *Jaime is here, and Uncle Kevan, and Pycelle has come and gone, but not Varys.* A cold finger touched her spine. *He was part of this. He must have feared that Father meant to have his head, so he struck first.* Lord Tywin had never had any love for the simpering master of whisperers. And if any man knew the Red Keep's secrets, it was surely the master of whisperers. *He must have made common cause with Lord Stannis. They served together on Robert's council, after all...*

Cersei strode to the door of the bedchamber, to Ser Meryn Trant. "Trant, bring me Lord Varys. Squealing and squirming if need be, but unharmed."

"As Your Grace commands."

But no sooner had one Kingsguard departed than another one returned. Ser Boros Blount was red-faced and puffing from his headlong rush up the steps. "Gone," he panted, when he saw the queen. He sank to one knee. "The Imp... his cell's open, Your Grace... no sign of him anywhere..."

The dream was true. "I gave orders," she said. "He was to be kept under guard, night and day..."

Blount's chest was heaving. "One of the gaolers has gone missing too. Rugen, his name was. Two other men we found asleep."

It was all she could do not to scream. “I hope you did not wake them, Ser Boros. Let them sleep.”

“Sleep?” He looked up, jowly and confused. “Aye, Your Grace. How long shall—”

“Forever. See that they sleep forever, ser. I will not suffer guards to sleep on watch.” *He is in the walls. He killed Father as he killed Mother, as he killed Joff.* The dwarf would come for her as well, the queen knew, just as the old woman had promised her in the dimness of that tent. *I laughed in her face, but she had powers. I saw my future in a drop of blood. My doom.* Her legs were weak as water. Ser Boros tried to take her by the arm, but the queen recoiled from his touch. For all she knew he might be one of Tyrion’s creatures. “Get away from me,” she said. “*Get away!*” She staggered to a settle.

“Your Grace?” said Blount. “Shall I fetch a cup of water?”

It is blood I need, not water. Tyrion’s blood, the blood of the valonqar. The torches spun around her. Cersei closed her eyes, and saw the dwarf grinning at her. *No, she thought, no, I was almost rid of you.* But his fingers had closed around her neck, and she could feel them beginning to tighten.