

JAIME

The brooch that fastened Ser Brynden Tully's cloak was a black fish, wrought in jet and gold. His ringmail was grim and grey. Over it he wore greaves, gorget, gauntlets, pauldron, and poleyns of blackened steel, none half so dark as the look upon his face as he waited for Jaime Lannister at the end of the drawbridge, alone atop a chestnut courser caparisoned in red and blue.

He loves me not. Tully had a craggy face, deeply lined and windburnt beneath a shock of stiff grey hair, but Jaime could still see the great knight who had once enthralled a squire with tales of the Ninepenny Kings. Honor's hooves clattered against the planks of the drawbridge. Jaime had thought long and hard about whether to wear his gold armor or his white to this meeting; in the end, he'd chosen a leather jack and a crimson cloak.

He drew up a yard from Ser Brynden, and inclined his head to the older man. "Kingslayer," said Tully.

That he would make that name the first word from his mouth spoke volumes, but Jaime was resolved to keep his temper. "Blackfish," he responded. "Thank you for coming."

"I assume you have returned to fulfill the oaths you swore my niece," Ser Brynden said. "As I recall, you promised Catelyn her daughters in return for your freedom." His mouth tightened. "Yet I do not see the girls. Where are they?"

Must he make me say it? "I do not have them."

"Pity. Do you wish to resume your captivity? Your old cell is still available. We have put fresh rushes on the floor."

And a nice new pail for me to shit in, I don't doubt. "That was thoughtful of you, ser, but I fear I must decline. I prefer the comforts of my pavilion."

"Whilst Catelyn enjoys the comforts of her grave."

I had no hand in Lady Catelyn's death, he might have said, *and her daughters were gone before I reached King's Landing*. It was on his tongue to speak of Brienne and the sword he'd given her, but the Blackfish was looking at him the way that Eddard Stark had looked at him when he'd found him on the Iron Throne with the Mad King's blood upon his blade. "I came to speak of the living, not the dead. Of those who need not die, but shall..."

"...unless I hand you Riverrun. Is this where you threaten to hang Edmure?" Beneath his bushy brows, Tully's eyes were stone. "My nephew is marked for death no matter what I do. So hang him and be done with it. I expect that Edmure is as weary of standing on those gallows as I am of seeing him there."

Ryman Frey is a bloody fool. His mummer's show with Edmure and the gallows had only made the Blackfish more obdurate, that was plain. "You hold Lady Sybelle Westerling and three of her children. I'll return your nephew in exchange for them."

"As you returned Lady Catelyn's daughters?"

Jaime did not allow himself to be provoked. "An old woman and three children for your liege lord. That's a better bargain than you could have hoped for."

Ser Brynden smiled a hard smile. "You do not lack for gall, Kingslayer. Bargaining with oathbreakers is like building on quicksand, though. Cat should have known better than to trust the likes of you."

It was Tyrion she trusted in, Jaime almost said. *The Imp deceived her too*. "The promises I made to Lady Catelyn were wrung from me at swordpoint."

"And the oath you swore to Aerys?"

He felt his phantom fingers twitching. "Aerys is no part of this. Will you exchange the Westerlings for Edmure?"

"No. My king entrusted his queen to my keeping, and I swore to keep her safe. I will not hand her over to a Frey noose."

“The girl has been pardoned. No harm will come to her. You have my word on that.”

“Your word of *honor*?” Ser Brynden raised an eyebrow. “Do you even know what honor is?”

A horse. “I will swear any oath that you require.”

“Spare me, Kingslayer.”

“I want to. Strike your banners and open your gates and I’ll grant your men their lives. Those who wish to remain at Riverrun in service to Lord Emmon may do so. The rest shall be free to go where they will, though I will require them to surrender their arms and armor.”

“I wonder, how far will they get, unarmed, before ‘outlaws’ set upon them? You dare not allow them to join Lord Beric, we both know that. And what of me? Will I be paraded through King’s Landing to die like Eddard Stark?”

“I will permit you to take the black. Ned Stark’s bastard is the Lord Commander on the Wall.”

The Blackfish narrowed his eyes. “Did your father arrange for that as well? Catelyn never trusted the boy, as I recall, no more than she ever trusted Theon Greyjoy. It would seem she was right about them both. No, ser, I think not. I’ll die warm, if you please, with a sword in hand running red with lion blood.”

“Tully blood runs just as red,” Jaime reminded him. “If you will not yield the castle, I must storm it. Hundreds will die.”

“Hundreds of mine. Thousands of yours.”

“Your garrison will perish to a man.”

“I know that song. Do you sing it to the tune of ‘The Rains of Castamere’? My men would sooner die upon their feet fighting than on their knees beneath a headsman’s axe.”

This is not going well. “This defiance serves no purpose, ser. The war is done, and your Young Wolf is dead.”

“Murdered in breach of all the sacred laws of hospitality.”

“Frey’s work, not mine.”

“Call it what you will. It stinks of Tywin Lannister.”

Jaime could not deny that. “My father is dead as well.”

“May the Father judge him justly.”

Now, there’s an awful prospect. “I would have slain Robb Stark in the Whispering Wood, if I could have reached him. Some fools got in my way. Does it matter how the boy perished? He’s no less dead, and his kingdom died when he did.”

“You must be blind as well as maimed, ser. Lift your eyes, and you will see that the direwolf still flies above our walls.”

“I’ve seen him. He looks lonely. Harrenhal has fallen. Seagard and Maidenpool. The Brackens have bent the knee, and they’ve got Tytos Blackwood penned up in Raventree. Piper, Vance, Mooton, all your bannermen have yielded. Only Riverrun remains. We have twenty times your numbers.”

“Twenty times the men require twenty times the food. How well are you provisioned, my lord?”

“Well enough to sit here till the end of days if need be, whilst you starve inside your walls.” He told the lie as boldly as he could and hoped his face did not betray him.

The Blackfish was not deceived. “The end of your days, perhaps. Our own supplies are ample, though I fear we did not leave much in the fields for visitors.”

“We can bring food down from the Twins,” said Jaime, “or over the hills from the west, if it comes to that.”

“If you say so. Far be it from me to question the word of such an honorable knight.”

The scorn in his voice made Jaime bristle. “There is a quicker way to decide the matter. A single combat. My champion against yours.”

“I was wondering when you would get to that.” Ser Brynden laughed. “Who will it be? Strongboar? Addam Marbrand? Black Walder Frey?” He

leaned forward. “Why not you and me, ser?”

That would have been a sweet fight once, Jaime thought, fine fodder for the singers. “When Lady Catelyn freed me, she made me swear not to take arms again against the Starks or Tullys.”

“A most convenient oath, ser.”

His face darkened. “Are you calling me a coward?”

“No. I am calling you a cripple.” The Blackfish nodded at Jaime’s golden hand. “We both know you cannot fight with that.”

“I had two hands.” *Would you throw your life away for pride?* a voice inside him whispered. “Some might say a cripple and an old man are well matched. Free me from my vow to Lady Catelyn and I will meet you sword to sword. If I win, Riverrun is ours. If you slay me, we’ll lift the siege.”

Ser Brynden laughed again. “Much as I would welcome the chance to take that golden sword away from you and cut out your black heart, your promises are worthless. I would gain nothing from your death but the pleasure of killing you, and I will not risk my own life for that... as small a risk as that may be.”

It was a good thing that Jaime wore no sword; otherwise he would have ripped his blade out, and if Ser Brynden did not slay him, the archers on the walls most surely would. “Are there any terms you will accept?” he demanded of the Blackfish.

“From you?” Ser Brynden shrugged. “No.”

“Why did you even come to treat with me?”

“A siege is deadly dull. I wanted to see this stump of yours and hear whatever excuses you cared to offer up for your latest enormities. They were feebler than I’d hoped. You always disappoint, Kingslayer.” The Blackfish wheeled his mare and trotted back toward Riverrun. The portcullis descended with a rush, its iron spikes biting deep into the muddy ground.

Jaime turned Honor’s head about for the long ride back to the Lannister siege lines. He could feel the eyes on him; the Tully men upon their battlements, the Freys across the river. *If they are not blind, they’ll all know*

he threw my offer in my teeth. He would need to storm the castle. Well, what's one more broken vow to the Kingslayer? Just more shit in the bucket. Jaime resolved to be the first man on the battlements. And with this golden hand of mine, most like the first to fall.

Back at camp, Little Lew held his bridle whilst Peck gave him a hand down from the saddle. *Do they think I'm such a cripple that I cannot dismount by myself?* “How did you fare, my lord?” asked his cousin Ser Daven.

“No one put an arrow in my horse’s rump. Elsewise, there was little to distinguish me from Ser Ryman.” He grimaced. “So now he must needs turn the Red Fork redder.” *Blame yourself for that, Blackfish. You left me little choice.* “Assemble a war council. Ser Addam, Strongboar, Forley Prester, those river lords of ours... and our friends of Frey. Ser Ryman, Lord Emmon, whoever else they care to bring.”

They gathered quickly. Lord Piper and both Lords Vance came to speak for the repentant lords of the Trident, whose loyalties would shortly be put to the test. The west was represented by Ser Daven, Strongboar, Addam Marbrand, and Forley Prester. Lord Emmon Frey joined them, with his wife. Lady Genna claimed her stool with a look that dared any man there to question her presence. None did. The Freys sent Ser Walder Rivers, called “Bastard Walder,” and Ser Ryman’s firstborn Edwyn, a pallid, slender man with a pinched nose and lank dark hair. Under a blue lambswool cloak, Edwyn wore a jerkin of finely tooled grey calfskin with ornate scrollwork worked into the leather. “I speak for House Frey,” he announced. “My father is indisposed this morning.”

Ser Daven gave a snort. “Is he drunk, or just greensick from last night’s wine?”

Edwyn had the hard mean mouth of a miser. “Lord Jaime,” he said, “must I suffer such discourtesy?”

“Is it true?” Jaime asked him. “Is your father drunk?”

Frey pressed his lips together and eyed Ser Ilyn Payne, who was standing beside by the tent flap in his rusted mail, his sword poking up

above one bony shoulder. “He... my father has a bad belly, my lord. Red wine helps with his digestion.”

“He must be digesting a bloody mammoth,” said Ser Daven. Strongboar laughed, and Lady Genna chuckled.

“Enough,” said Jaime. “We have a castle to win.” When his father sat in council, he let his captains speak first. He was resolved to do the same. “How shall we proceed?”

“*Hang* Edmure Tully, for a start,” urged Lord Emmon Frey. “That will teach Ser Brynden that we mean what we say. If we send Ser Edmure’s head to his uncle, it may move him to yield.”

“Brynden Blackfish is not moved so easily.” Karyl Vance, the Lord of Wayfarer’s Rest, had a melancholy look. A winestain birthmark covered half his neck and one side of his face. “His own brother could not move him to a marriage bed.”

Ser Daven shook his shaggy head. “We have to storm the walls, as I’ve been saying all along. Siege towers, scaling ladders, a ram to break the gate, that’s what’s needed here.”

“I will lead the assault,” said Strongboar. “Give the fish a taste of steel and fire, that’s what I say.”

“They are *my* walls,” protested Lord Emmon, “and that is my gate you would break.” He drew his parchment out of his sleeve again. “King Tommen himself has granted me—”

“We’ve all seen your paper, nuncle,” snapped Edwyn Frey. “Why don’t you go wave it at the Blackfish for a change?”

“Storming the walls will be a bloody business,” said Addam Marbrand. “I propose we wait for a moonless night and send a dozen picked men across the river in a boat with muffled oars. They can scale the walls with ropes and grapnels, and open the gates from the inside. I will lead them, if the council wishes.”

“Folly,” declared the bastard, Walder Rivers. “Ser Brynden is no man to be cozened by such tricks.”

“The Blackfish is the obstacle,” agreed Edwyn Frey. “His helm bears a black trout on its crest that makes him easy to pick out from afar. I propose that we move our siege towers close, fill them full of bowmen, and feign an attack upon the gates. That will bring Ser Brynden to the battlements, crest and all. Let every archer smear his shafts with night soil, and make that crest his mark. Once Ser Brynden dies, Riverrun is ours.”

“Mine,” piped Lord Emmon. “Riverrun is *mine*.”

Lord Karyl’s birthmark darkened. “Will the night soil be your own contribution, Edwyn? A mortal poison, I don’t doubt.”

“The Blackfish deserves a nobler death, and I’m the man to give it to him.” Strongboar thumped his fist on the table. “I will challenge him to single combat. Mace or axe or longsword, makes no matter. The old man will be my meat.”

“Why would he deign to accept your challenge, ser?” asked Ser Forley Prester. “What could he gain from such a duel? Will we lift the siege if he should win? I do not believe that. Nor will he. A single combat would accomplish nought.”

“I have known Brynden Tully since we were squires together, in service to Lord Darry,” said Norbert Vance, the blind Lord of Atranta. “If it please my lords, let me go and speak with him and try to make him understand the hopelessness of his position.”

“He understands that well enough,” said Lord Piper. He was a short, rotund, bowlegged man with a bush of wild red hair, the father of one of Jaime’s squires; the resemblance to the boy was unmistakable. “The man’s not bloody *stupid*, Norbert. He has eyes... and too much sense to yield to such as these.” He made a rude gesture in the direction of Edwyn Frey and Walder Rivers.

Edwyn bristled. “If my lord of Piper means to imply—”

“I don’t *imply*, Frey. I say what I mean straight out, like an honest man. But what would *you* know of the ways of honest men? You’re a treacherous lying weasel, like all your kin. I’d sooner drink a pint of piss than take the word of any Frey.” He leaned across the table. “Where is Marq, answer me

that? What have you done with my son? He was a *guest* at your bloody wedding.”

“And our honored guest he shall remain,” said Edwyn, “until you prove your loyalty to His Grace, King Tommen.”

“Five knights and twenty men-at-arms went with Marq to the Twins,” said Piper. “Are they your guests as well, Frey?”

“Some of the knights, perhaps. The others were served no more than they deserved. You’d do well to guard your traitor’s tongue, Piper, unless you want your heir returned in pieces.”

My father’s councils never went like this, Jaime thought, as Piper came lurching to his feet. “Say that with a sword in your hand, Frey,” the small man snarled. “Or do you only fight with smears of shit?”

Frey’s pinched face went pale. Beside him Walder Rivers rose. “Edwyn is no man of the sword... but I am, Piper. If you have more remarks to make, come outside and make them.”

“This is a war council, not a war,” Jaime reminded them. “Sit down, the both of you.” Neither man moved. “*Now!*”

Walder Rivers seated himself. Lord Piper was not so easy to cow. He muttered a curse and strode from the tent. “Shall I send men after him to drag him back, my lord?” Ser Daven asked Jaime.

“Send Ser Ilyn,” urged Edwyn Frey. “We only need his head.”

Karyl Vance turned to Jaime. “Lord Piper spoke from grief. Marq is his firstborn son. Those knights who accompanied him to the Twins were nephews and cousins all.”

“Traitors and rebels all, you mean,” said Edwyn Frey.

Jaime gave him a cold look. “The Twins took up the Young Wolf’s cause as well,” he reminded the Freys. “Then you betrayed him. That makes you twice as treacherous as Piper.” He enjoyed seeing Edwyn’s thin smile curdle up and die. *I have endured sufficient counsel for one day*, he decided. “We’re done. See to your preparations, my lords. We attack at first light.”

The wind was blowing from the north as the lords filed from the tent. Jaime could smell the stink of the Frey encampments beyond the

Tumblestone. Across the water Edmure Tully stood forlorn atop the tall grey gallows, with a rope around his neck.

His aunt departed last, her husband at her heels. “Lord nephew,” Emmon protested, “this assault on my seat... you must not do this.” When he swallowed, the apple in his throat moved up and down. “You must *not*. I... I forbid it.” He had been chewing sourleaf again; pinkish froth glistened on his lips. “The castle is mine, I have the parchment. Signed by the king, by little Tommen. I am the lawful lord of Riverrun, and...”

“Not so long as Edmure Tully lives,” said Lady Genna. “He is soft of heart and soft of head, I know, but alive, the man is still a danger. What do you mean to do about that, Jaime?”

It's the Blackfish who is the danger, not Edmure. “Leave Edmure to me. Ser Lyle, Ser Ilyn. Attend me, if you would. It's time I paid a visit to those gallows.”

The Tumblestone was deeper and swifter than the Red Fork, and the nearest ford was leagues upstream. The ferry had just started across with Walder Rivers and Edwyn Frey when Jaime and his men arrived at the river. As they awaited its return, Jaime told them what he wanted. Ser Ilyn spat into the river.

When the three of them stepped off the ferry on the north bank, a drunken camp follower offered to pleasure Strongboar with her mouth. “Here, pleasure my friend,” Ser Lyle said, shoving her toward Ser Ilyn. Laughing, the woman moved to kiss Payne on the lips, then saw his eyes and shrank away.

The paths between the cookfires were raw brown mud, mixed with horse dung and torn up by hooves and boots alike. Everywhere Jaime saw the twin towers of House Frey displayed on shield and banners, blue on grey, along with the arms of lesser Houses sworn to the Crossing: the heron of Erenford, the pitchfork of Haigh, Lord Charlton's three sprigs of mistletoe. The arrival of the Kingslayer did not go unnoticed. An old woman selling piglets from a basket stopped to stare at him, a knight with a half-familiar face went to one knee, and two men-at-arms pissing in a ditch turned and sprayed each other. “Ser Jaime,” someone called after him, but

he strode on without turning. Around him he glimpsed the faces of men he'd done his best to kill in the Whispering Wood, where the Freys had fought beneath the direwolf banners of Robb Stark. His golden hand hung heavy at his side.

Ryman Frey's great rectangular pavilion was the largest in the camp; its grey canvas walls were made of sewn squares to resemble stonework, and its two peaks evoked the Twins. Far from being indisposed, Ser Ryman was enjoying some entertainment. The sound of a woman's drunken laughter drifted from within the tent, mingled with the strains of a woodharp and a singer's voice. *I will deal with you later, ser*, Jaime thought. Walder Rivers stood before his own modest tent, talking with two men-at-arms. His shield bore the arms of House Frey with the colors reversed, and a red bend sinister across the towers. When the bastard saw Jaime, he frowned. *There's a cold suspicious look if ever I saw one. That one is more dangerous than any of his trueborn brothers.*

The gallows had been raised ten feet off the ground. Two spearmen were posted at the foot of the steps. "You can't go up without Ser Ryman's leave," one told Jaime.

"This says I can." Jaime tapped his sword hilt with a finger. "The question is, will I need to step over your corpse?"

The spearmen moved aside.

Atop the gallows, the Lord of Riverrun stood staring at the trap beneath him. His feet were black and caked with mud, his legs bare. Edmure wore a soiled silken tunic striped in Tully red and blue, and a noose of hempen rope. At the sound of Jaime's footsteps, he raised his head and licked his dry, cracked lips. "*Kingslayer?*" The sight of Ser Ilyn widened his eyes. "Better a sword than a rope. Do it, Payne."

"Ser Ilyn," said Jaime. "You heard Lord Tully. Do it."

The silent knight gripped his greatsword with both hands. Long and heavy it was, sharp as common steel could be. Edmure's cracked lips moved soundlessly. As Ser Ilyn drew the blade back, he closed his eyes. The stroke had all Payne's weight behind it.

“*No! Stop. NO!*” Edwyn Frey came panting into view. “My father comes. Fast as he can. Jaime, you must...”

“*My lord* would suit me better, Frey,” said Jaime. “And you would do well to omit *must* from any speech directed at me.”

Ser Ryman came stomping up the gallows steps in company with a straw-haired slattern as drunk as he was. Her gown laced up the front, but someone had undone the laces to the navel, so her breasts were spilling out. They were large and heavy, with big brown nipples. On her head a circlet of hammered bronze sat askew, graven with runes and ringed with small black swords. When she saw Jaime, she laughed. “Who in seven hells is this one?”

“The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard,” Jaime returned with cold courtesy. “I might ask the same of you, my lady.”

“Lady? I’m no lady. I’m the queen.”

“My sister will be surprised to hear that.”

“Lord Ryman crowned me his very self.” She gave a shake of her ample hips. “I’m the queen o’ whores.”

No, Jaime thought, my sweet sister holds that title too.

Ser Ryman found his tongue. “Shut your mouth, slut, Lord Jaime doesn’t want to hear some harlot’s nonsense.” This Frey was a thickset man with a broad face, small eyes, and a soft fleshy set of chins. His breath stank of wine and onions.

“Making queens, Ser Ryman?” Jaime asked softly. “Stupid. As stupid as this business with Lord Edmure.”

“I gave the Blackfish warning. I told him Edmure would die unless the castle yielded. I had this gallows built, to show them that Ser Ryman Frey does not make idle threats. At Seagard my son Walder did the same with Patrek Mallister and Lord Jason bent the knee, but... the Blackfish is a cold man. He refused us, so...”

“...you hanged Lord Edmure?”

The man reddened. “My lord grandfather... if we hang the man we have no *hostage*, ser. Have you considered that?”

“Only a fool makes threats he’s not prepared to carry out. If I were to threaten to hit you unless you shut your mouth, and you presumed to speak, what do you think I’d do?”

“Ser, you do not unders—”

Jaime hit him. It was a backhand blow delivered with his golden hand, but the force of it sent Ser Ryman stumbling backward into the arms of his whore. “You have a fat head, Ser Ryman, and a thick neck as well. Ser Ilyn, how many strokes would it take you to cut through that neck?”

Ser Ilyn laid a single finger against his nose.

Jaime laughed. “An empty boast. I say three.”

Ryman Frey went to his knees. “I have done nothing...”

“...but drink and whore. I know.”

“I am heir to the Crossing. You can’t...”

“I warned you about talking.” Jaime watched the man turn white. *A sot, a fool, and a craven. Lord Walder had best outlive this one, or the Freys are done.* “You are dismissed, ser.”

“Dismissed?”

“You heard me. Go away.”

“But... where should I go?”

“To hell or home, as you prefer. See that you are not in camp when the sun comes up. You may take your queen of whores, but not that crown of hers.” Jaime turned from Ser Ryman to his son. “Edwyn, I am giving you your father’s command. Try not to be so stupid as your sire.”

“That ought not pose much difficulty, my lord.”

“Send word to Lord Walder. The crown requires all his prisoners.” Jaime waved his golden hand. “Ser Lyle, bring him.”

Edmure Tully had collapsed facedown on the scaffold when Ser Ilyn’s blade sheared the rope in two. A foot of hemp still dangled from the noose about his neck. Strongboar grabbed the end of it and pulled him to his feet. “A fish on a leash,” he said, chortling. “There’s a sight I never saw before.”

The Freys stepped aside to let them pass. A crowd had gathered below the scaffold, including a dozen camp followers in various states of disarray. Jaime noticed one man holding a woodharp. "You. Singer. Come with me."

The man doffed his hat. "As my lord commands."

No one said a word as they walked back to the ferry, with Ser Ryman's singer trailing after them. But as they shoved off from the riverbank and made for the south side of the Tumblestone, Edmure Tully grabbed Jaime by the arm. "*Why?*"

A Lannister pays his debts, he thought, and you're the only coin that's left to me. "Consider it a wedding gift."

Edmure stared at him with wary eyes. "A... wedding gift?"

"I am told your wife is pretty. She'd have to be, for you to bed her while your sister and your king were being murdered."

"I never knew." Edmure licked his cracked lips. "There were fiddlers outside the bedchamber..."

"And Lady Roslin was distracting you."

"She... they made her do it, Lord Walder and the rest. Roslin never wanted... she wept, but I thought it was..."

"The sight of your rampant manhood? Aye, that would make any woman weep, I'm sure."

"She is carrying my child."

No, Jaime thought, *that's your death she has growing in her belly*. Back at his pavilion, he dismissed Strongboar and Ser Ilyn, but not the singer. "I may have need of a song shortly," he told the man. "Lew, heat some bathwater for my guest. Pia, find him some clean clothing. Nothing with lions on it, if you please. Peck, wine for Lord Tully. Are you hungry, my lord?"

Edmure nodded, but his eyes were still suspicious.

Jaime settled on a stool while Tully had his bath. The filth came off in grey clouds. "Once you've eaten, my men will escort you to Riverrun. What happens after that is up to you."

“What do you mean?”

“Your uncle is an old man. Valiant, yes, but the best part of his life is done. He has no bride to grieve for him, no children to defend. A good death is all the Blackfish can hope for... but you have years remaining, Edmure. And *you* are the rightful lord of House Tully, not him. Your uncle serves at your pleasure. The fate of Riverrun is in your hands.”

Edmure stared. “The fate of Riverrun...”

“Yield the castle and no one dies. Your smallfolk may go in peace or stay to serve Lord Emmon. Ser Brynden will be allowed to take the black, along with as many of the garrison as choose to join him. You as well, if the Wall appeals to you. Or you may go to Casterly Rock as my captive and enjoy all the comforts and courtesy that befits a hostage of your rank. I’ll send your wife to join you, if you like. If her child is a boy, he will serve House Lannister as a page and a squire, and when he earns his knighthood we’ll bestow some lands upon him. Should Roslin give you a daughter, I’ll see her well dowered when she’s old enough to wed. You yourself may even be granted parole, once the war is done. All you need do is yield the castle.”

Edmure raised his hands from the tub and watched the water run between his fingers. “And if I will not yield?”

Must you make me say the words? Pia was standing by the flap of the tent with her arms full of clothes. His squires were listening as well, and the singer. *Let them hear, Jaime thought. Let the world hear. It makes no matter.* He forced himself to smile, “You’ve seen our numbers, Edmure. You’ve seen the ladders, the towers, the trebuchets, the rams. If I speak the command, my coz will bridge your moat and break your gate. Hundreds will die, most of them your own. Your former bannermen will make up the first wave of attackers, so you’ll start your day by killing the fathers and brothers of men who died for you at the Twins. The second wave will be Freys, I have no lack of those. My westermen will follow when your archers are short of arrows and your knights so weary they can hardly lift their blades. When the castle falls, all those inside will be put to the sword. Your herds will be butchered, your godswood will be felled, your keeps and

towers will burn. I'll pull your walls down, and divert the Tumblestone over the ruins. By the time I'm done no man will ever know that a castle once stood here." Jaime got to his feet. "Your wife may whelp before that. You'll want your child, I expect. I'll send him to you when he's born. With a trebuchet."

Silence followed his speech. Edmure sat in his bath. Pia clutched the clothing to her breasts. The singer tightened a string on his harp. Little Lew hollowed out a loaf of stale bread to make a trencher, pretending that he had not heard. *With a trebuchet*, Jaime thought. If his aunt had been there, would she still say Tyrion was Tywin's son?

Edmure Tully finally found his voice. "I could climb out of this tub and kill you where you stand, Kingslayer."

"You could try." Jaime waited. When Edmure made no move to rise, he said, "I'll leave you to enjoy your food. Singer, play for our guest whilst he eats. You know the song, I trust."

"The one about the rain? Aye, my lord. I know it."

Edmure seemed to see the man for the first time. "No. Not him. Get him away from me."

"Why, it's just a song," said Jaime. "He cannot have *that* bad a voice."

CERSEI

Grand Maester Pycelle had been old for as long as she had known him, but he seemed to have aged another hundred years in the past three nights. It took him an eternity to bend his creaky knee before her, and once he had he could not rise again until Ser Osmund jerked him to his feet.

Cersei studied him with displeasure. “Lord Qyburn informs me that Lord Gyles has coughed his last.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I did my best to ease his passing.”

“Did you?” The queen turned to Lady Merryweather. “I *did* say I wanted Rosby alive, did I not?”

“You did, Your Grace.”

“Ser Osmund, what is your recollection of the conversation?”

“You commanded Grand Maester Pycelle to save the man, Your Grace. We all heard.”

Pycelle’s mouth opened and closed. “Your Grace must know, I did all that could be done for the poor man.”

“As you did for Joffrey? And his father, my own beloved husband? Robert was as strong as any man in the Seven Kingdoms, yet you lost him to a boar. Oh, and let us not forget Jon Arryn. No doubt you would have killed Ned Stark as well, if I had let you keep him longer. Tell me, maester, was it at the Citadel that you learned to wring your hands and make excuses?”

Her voice made the old man flinch. “No man could have done more, Your Grace. I... I have always given leal service.”

“When you counseled King Aerys to open his gates as my father’s host approached, was that your notion of leal service?”

“That... I misjudged the...”

“Was that good counsel?”

“Your Grace must surely know...”

“What I *know* is that when my son was poisoned you proved to be of less use than Moon Boy. What I *know* is that the crown has desperate need of gold, and our lord treasurer is dead.”

The old fool seized upon that. “I... I shall draw up a list of men suitable to take Lord Gyles’s place upon the council.”

“A list.” Cersei was amused by his presumption. “I can well imagine the sort of list you would provide me. Greybeards and grasping fools and Garth the Gross.” Her lips tightened. “You have been much in Lady Margaery’s company of late.”

“Yes. Yes, I... Queen Margaery has been most distraught about Ser Loras. I provide Her Grace with sleeping draughts and... other sorts of potions.”

“No doubt. Tell me, was it our little queen who commanded you to kill Lord Gyles?”

“K-kill?” Grand Maester Pycelle’s eyes grew as big as boiled eggs. “Your Grace cannot believe... it was his cough, by all the gods, I... Her Grace would not... she bore Lord Gyles no ill will, why would Queen Margaery want him...”

“...dead? Why, to plant another rose on Tommen’s council. Are you blind or bought? Rosby stood in her way, so she put him in his grave. With your connivance.”

“Your Grace, I swear to you, Lord Gyles perished from his cough.” His mouth was quivering. “My loyalty has always been to the crown, to the realm... t-to House Lannister.”

In that order? Pycelle’s fear was palpable. *He is ripe enough. Time to squeeze the fruit and taste the juice.* “If you are as leal as you claim, why are you lying to me? Do not trouble to deny it. You began to dance attendance on Maid Margaery *before* Ser Loras went to Dragonstone, so spare me further fables about how you want only to console our good-daughter in her grief. What brings you to the Maidenvault so often? Not Margaery’s vapid conversation, surely? Are you courting that pox-faced

septa of hers? Diddling little Lady Bulwer? Do you play the spy for her, informing on me to serve her plots?"

"I... I obey. A maester takes an oath of service..."

"A grand maester swears to serve the *realm*."

"Your Grace, she... she is the queen..."

"I am the queen."

"I meant... she is the king's wife, and..."

"I know who she is. What I want to know is why she has need of *you*. Is my good-daughter unwell?"

"Unwell?" The old man plucked at the thing he called a beard, that patched growth of thin white hair sprouting from the loose pink wattles under his chin. "N-not unwell, Your Grace, not as such. My oaths forbid me to divulge..."

"Your oaths will be of small comfort in the black cells," she warned him. "I'll hear the truth, or you'll wear chains."

Pycelle collapsed to his knees. "I beg you... I was your lord father's man, and a friend to you in the matter of Lord Arryn. I could not survive the dungeons, not again..."

"Why does Margaery send for you?"

"She desires... she... she..."

"Say it!"

He cringed. "Moon tea," he whispered. "Moon tea, for..."

"I know what moon tea is for." *There it is*. "Very well. Get off those saggy knees and try to remember what it was to be a man." Pycelle struggled to rise, but took so long about it that she had to tell Osmund Kettleblack to give him another yank. "As to Lord Gyles, no doubt our Father Above will judge him justly. He left no children?"

"No children of his body, but there is a ward..."

"...not of his blood." Cersei dismissed that annoyance with a flick of her hand. "Gyles knew of our dire need for gold. No doubt he told you of his wish to leave all his lands and wealth to Tommen." Rosby's gold would

help refresh their coffers, and Rosby's lands and castle could be bestowed upon one of her own as a reward for leal service. *Lord Waters, perhaps.* Aurane had been hinting at his need for a seat; his lordship was only an empty honor without one. He had his eye on Dragonstone, Cersei knew, but there he aimed too high. Rosby would be more suitable to his birth and station.

"Lord Gyles loved His Grace with all his heart," Pycelle was saying, "but... his ward..."

"...will doubtless understand, once he hears you speak of Lord Gyles's dying wish. Go, and see it done."

"If it please Your Grace." Grand Maester Pycelle almost tripped over his own robes in his haste to leave.

Lady Merryweather closed the door behind him. "Moon tea," she said, as she turned back to the queen. "How foolish of her. Why would she do such a thing, take such a risk?"

"The little queen has appetites that Tommen is as yet too young to satisfy." That was always a danger, when a grown woman was married to a child. *Even more so with a widow. She may claim that Renly never touched her, but I will not believe it.* Women only drank moon tea for one reason; maidens had no need for it at all. "My son has been betrayed. Margaery has a lover. That is high treason, punishable by death." She could only hope that Mace Tyrell's prune-faced harridan of a mother lived long enough to see the trial. By insisting that Tommen and Margaery be wed at once, Lady Olenna had condemned her precious rose to a headsman's sword. "Jaime made off with Ser Ilyn Payne. I suppose I shall need to find a new King's Justice to snick her head off."

"I'll do it," offered Osmund Kettleblack, with an easy grin. "Margaery's got a pretty little neck. A good sharp sword will go right through it."

"It would," said Taena, "but there is a Tyrell army at Storm's End and another at Maidenpool. They have sharp swords as well."

I am awash in roses. It was vexing. She still had need of Mace Tyrell, if not his daughter. *At least until such time as Stannis is defeated. Then I shan't need any of them.* But how could she rid herself of the daughter without losing the father? "Treason is treason," she said, "but we must have proof, something more substantial than moon tea. If she is *proved* to be untrue, even her own lord father must condemn her, or her shame becomes his own."

Kettleblack chewed on one end of his mustache. "We need to catch them during the deed."

"How? Qyburn has eyes on her day and night. Her serving men take my coin, but bring us only trifles. Yet no one has seen this lover. The ears outside her door hear singing, laughter, gossip, nothing of any use."

"Margaery is too shrewd to be caught so easily," said Lady Merryweather. "Her women are her castle walls. They sleep with her, dress her, pray with her, read with her, sew with her. When she is not hawking or riding she is playing come-into-my-castle with little Alysanne Bulwer. Whenever men are about, her septa will be with her, or her cousins."

"She must rid herself of her hens *sometime*," the queen insisted. A thought struck her. "Unless her ladies are part of it as well... not all of them, perhaps, but some."

"The cousins?" Even Taena sounded doubtful. "All three are younger than the little queen, and more innocent."

"Wantons clad in maiden's white. That only makes their sins more shocking. Their names will live in shame." Suddenly the queen could almost taste it. "Taena, your lord husband is my justiciar. The two of you must sup with me, this very night." She wanted this done quickly, before Margaery took it in her little head to return to Highgarden, or sail to Dragonstone to be with her wounded brother at death's door. "I shall command the cooks to roast a boar for us. And of course we must have some music, to help with our digestion."

Taena was very quick. "Music. Just so."

“Go and tell your lord husband and make arrangements for the singer,” Cersei urged. “Ser Osmund, you may remain. We have much and more to discuss. I shall have need of Qyburn too.”

Sad to say, the kitchens proved to have no wild boar on hand, and there was not time enough to send out hunters. Instead, the cooks butchered one of the castle sows, and served them ham studded with cloves and basted with honey and dried cherries. It was not what Cersei wanted, but she made do. Afterward they had baked apples with a sharp white cheese. Lady Taena savored every bite. Not so Orton Merryweather, whose round face remained blotched and pale from broth to cheese. He drank heavily and kept stealing glances at the singer.

“A great pity about Lord Gyles,” Cersei said at last. “I daresay none of us will miss his coughing, though.”

“No. No, I’d think not.”

“We shall have need of a new lord treasurer. If the Vale were not so unsettled, I would bring back Petyr Baelish, but... I am minded to try Ser Harys in the office. He can do no worse than Gyles, and at least he does not cough.”

“Ser Harys is the King’s Hand,” said Taena.

Ser Harys is a hostage, and feeble even at that. “It is time that Tommen had a more forceful Hand.”

Lord Orton lifted his gaze from his wine cup. “Forceful. To be sure.” He hesitated. “Who...?”

“You, my lord. It is in your blood. Your grandsire took my own father’s place as Hand to Aerys.” Replacing Tywin Lannister with Owen Merryweather had proved to be akin to replacing a destrier with a donkey, to be sure, but Owen had been an old done man when Aerys raised him, amiable if ineffectual. His grandson was younger, and... *Well, he has a strong wife.* It was a pity Taena could not serve as Hand. She was thrice the man her husband was, and far more amusing. She was also Myrish-born and female, however, so Orton must needs suffice. “I have no doubt that

you are more able than Ser Harys.” *The contents of my chamber pot are more able than Ser Harys.* “Will you consent to serve?”

“I... yes, of course. Your Grace does me great honor.”

A greater one than you deserve. “You have served me ably as justiciar, my lord. And will continue to do so through these... trying times ahead.” When she saw that Merryweather had grasped her meaning, the queen turned to smile at the singer. “And you must be rewarded as well, for all the sweet songs you have played for us whilst we ate. The gods have given you a gift.”

The singer bowed. “Your Grace is kind to say so.”

“Not kind,” said Cersei, “merely truthful. Taena tells me that you are called the Blue Bard.”

“I am, Your Grace.” The singer’s boots were supple blue calfskin, his breeches fine blue wool. The tunic he wore was pale blue silk slashed with shiny blue satin. He had even gone so far as to dye his hair blue, in the Tyroshi fashion. Long and curly, it fell to his shoulders and smelled as if it had been washed in rosewater. *From blue roses, no doubt. At least his teeth are white.* They were good teeth, not the least bit crooked.

“You have no other name?”

A hint of pink suffused his cheeks. “As a boy, I was called Wat. A fine name for a plowboy, less fitting for a singer.”

The Blue Bard’s eyes were the same color as Robert’s. For that alone, she hated him. “It is easy to see why you are Lady Margaery’s favorite.”

“Her Grace is kind. She says I give her pleasure.”

“Oh, I’m certain of it. Might I see your lute?”

“If it please Your Grace.” Beneath the courtesy, there was a faint hint of unease, but he handed her the lute all the same. One does not refuse the queen’s request.

Cersei plucked a string and smiled at the sound. “Sweet and sad as love. Tell me, Wat... the first time you took Margaery to bed, was that before she wed my son, or after?”

For a moment he did not seem to understand. When he did, his eyes grew large. “Your Grace has been misinformed. I swear to you, I never—”

“*Liar!*” Cersei smashed the lute across the singer’s face so hard the painted wood exploded into shards and splinters. “Lord Orton, summon my guards and take this creature to the dungeons.”

Orton Merryweather’s face was damp with fear. “This... oh, infamy... he dared seduce *the queen*?”

“I fear it was the other way around, but he is a traitor all the same. Let him sing for Lord Qyburn.”

The Blue Bard went white. “No.” Blood dripped from his lip where the lute had torn it. “I never...” When Merryweather seized him by the arm, he screamed, “*Mother have mercy, no.*”

“I am not your mother,” Cersei told him.

Even in the black cells, all they got from him were denials, prayers, and pleas for mercy. Before long, blood was streaming down his chin from all his broken teeth, and he wet his dark blue breeches three times over, yet still the man persisted in his lies. “Is it possible we have the wrong singer?” Cersei asked.

“All things are possible, Your Grace. Have no fear. The man will confess before the night is done.” Down here in the dungeons, Qyburn wore roughspun wool and a blacksmith’s leather apron. To the Blue Bard he said, “I am sorry if the guards were rough with you. Their courtesies are sadly lacking.” His voice was kind, solicitous. “All we want from you is the truth.”

“I’ve told you the truth,” the singer sobbed. Iron shackles held him hard against the cold stone wall.

“We know better.” Qyburn had a razor in his hand, its edge gleaming faintly in the torchlight. He cut away the Blue Bard’s clothing, until the man was naked but for his high blue boots. The hair between his legs was brown, Cersei was amused to see. “Tell us how you pleased the little queen,” she commanded.

“I never... I sang, was all, I sang and played. Her ladies will tell you. They were always with us. Her cousins.”

“How many of them did you have carnal knowledge of?”

“None of them. I’m just a singer. Please.”

Qyburn said, “Your Grace, mayhaps this poor man only played for Margaery whilst she entertained other lovers.”

“No. *Please*. She never... I *sang*, I only *sang*...”

Lord Qyburn ran a hand up the Blue Bard’s chest. “Does she take your nipples in her mouth during your love play?” He took one between his thumb and forefinger, and twisted. “Some men enjoy that. Their nipples are as sensitive as a woman’s.” The razor flashed, the singer shrieked. On his chest a wet red eye wept blood. Cersei felt ill. Part of her wanted to close her eyes, to turn away, to make it stop. But she was the queen and this was treason. *Lord Tywin would not have turned away.*

In the end the Blue Bard told them his whole life, back to his first name day. His father had been a chandler and Wat was raised to that trade, but as a boy he found he had more skill at making lutes than barrels. When he was twelve he ran off to join a troupe of musicians he had heard performing at a fair. He had wandered half the Reach before coming to King’s Landing in hopes of finding favor at court.

“Favor?” Qyburn chuckled. “Is that what women call it now? I fear you found too much of it, my friend... and from the wrong queen. The true one stands before you.”

Yes. Cersei blamed Margaery Tyrell for this. If not for her, Wat might have lived a long and fruitful life, singing his little songs and bedding pig girls and crofter’s daughters. *Her scheming forced this on me. She has soiled me with her treachery.*

By dawn the singer’s high blue boots were full of blood, and he had told them how Margaery would fondle herself as she watched her cousins pleasuring him with their mouths. At other times he would sing for her whilst she sated her lusts with other lovers. “Who were they?” the queen demanded, and the wretched Wat named Ser Tallad the Tall, Lambert

Turnberry, Jalabhar Xho, the Redwyne twins, Osney Kettleblack, Hugh Clifton, and the Knight of Flowers.

That displeased her. She dare not besmirch the name of the hero of Dragonstone. Besides, no one who knew Ser Loras would ever believe it. The Redwynes could not be a part of it either. Without the Arbor and its fleet, the realm could never hope to rid itself of this Euron Crow's Eye and his accursed ironmen. "All you are doing is spitting up the names of men you saw about her chambers. We want the *truth!*"

"The truth." Wat looked at her with the one blue eye that Qyburn had left him. Blood bubbled through the holes where his front teeth had been. "I might have... misremembered."

"Horas and Hobber had no part of this, did they?"

"No," he admitted. "Not them."

"As for Ser Loras, I am certain Margaery took pains to hide what she was doing from her brother."

"She did. I remember now. Once I had to hide under the bed when Ser Loras came to see her. *He must never know*, she said."

"I prefer this song to the other." Leave the great lords out of it, that was for the best. The others, though... Ser Tallad had been a hedge knight, Jalabhar Xho was an exile and a beggar, Clifton was the only one of the little queen's guardsman. *And Osney is the plum that makes the pudding.* "I know you feel better for having told the truth. You will want to remember that when Margaery comes to trial. If you were to start lying again..."

"I won't. I'll tell it true. And after..."

"...you will be allowed to take the black. You have my word on that." Cersei turned to Qyburn. "See that his wounds are cleaned and dressed, and give him milk of the poppy for the pain."

"Your Grace is good." Qyburn dropped the bloody razor into a pail of vinegar. "Margaery may wonder where her bard has gone."

"Singers come and go, they are infamous for it."

The climb up the dark stone steps from the black cells left Cersei feeling breathless. *I must rest.* Getting to the truth was wearisome work, and

she dreaded what must follow. *I must be strong. What I must do I do for Tommen and the realm.* It was a pity that Maggy the Frog was dead. *Piss on your prophecy, old woman. The little queen may be younger than I, but she has never been more beautiful, and soon she will be dead.*

Lady Merryweather was waiting in her bedchamber. It was the black of night, closer to dawn than to dusk. Jocelyn and Dorcas were both asleep, but not Taena. “Was it terrible?” she asked.

“You cannot know. I need to sleep, but fear to dream.”

Taena stroked her hair. “It was all for Tommen.”

“It was. I know it was.” Cersei shuddered. “My throat is raw. Be a sweet and pour me some wine.”

“If it please you. That is all that I desire.”

Liar. She knew what Taena desired. So be it. If the woman was besotted with her, that would help ensure that she and her husband remained loyal. In a world so full of treachery, that was worth a few kisses. *She is no worse than most men. At least there is no danger of her ever getting me with child.*

The wine helped, but not enough. “I feel soiled,” the queen complained as she stood beside her window, cup in hand.

“A bath will set you right, my sweet.” Lady Merryweather woke Dorcas and Jocelyn and sent them for hot water. As the tub was filled, she helped the queen disrobe, undoing her laces with deft fingers and easing the gown off her shoulders. Then she slipped out of her own dress and let it puddle on the floor.

The two of them shared the bath together, with Cersei lying back in Taena’s arms. “Tommen must be spared the worst of this,” she told the Myrish woman. “Margaery still takes him to the sept every day, so they can ask the gods to heal her brother.” Ser Loras still clung to life, annoyingly. “He is fond of her cousins as well. It will go hard on him, to lose them all.”

“All three may not be guilty,” suggested Lady Merryweather. “Why, it might well be that one of them took no part. If she was shamed and sickened by the things she saw...”

“...she might be persuaded to bear witness against the others. Yes, very good, but which one is the innocent?”

“Alla.”

“The shy one?”

“So she seems, but there is more of *sly* than *shy* in her. Leave her to me, my sweet.”

“Gladly.” Alone, the Blue Bard’s confession would never suffice. Singers lied for their living, after all. Alla Tyrell would be of great help, if Taena could deliver her. “Ser Osney shall confess as well. The others must be made to understand that only through confession can they earn the king’s forgiveness, and the Wall.” Jalabhar Xho would find the truth attractive. About the rest she was less certain, but Qyburn was persuasive...

Dawn was breaking over King’s Landing when they climbed from the tub. The queen’s skin was white and wrinkled from her long immersion. “Stay with me,” she told Taena. “I do not want to sleep alone.” She even said a prayer before she crawled beneath her coverlet, beseeching the Mother for sweet dreams.

It proved a waste of breath; as ever, the gods were deaf. Cersei dreamt that she was down in the black cells once again, only this time it was her chained to the wall in place of the singer. She was naked, and blood dripped from the tips of her breasts where the Imp had torn off her nipples with his teeth. “Please,” she begged, “please, not my children, do not harm my children.” Tyrion only leered at her. He was naked too, covered with coarse hair that made him look more like a monkey than a man. “You shall see them crowned,” he said, “and you shall see them die.” Then he took her bleeding breast into his mouth and began to suck, and pain sawed through her like a hot knife.

She woke shuddering in Taena’s arms. “A bad dream,” she said weakly. “Did I scream? I’m sorry.”

“Dreams turn to dust in light of day. Was it the dwarf again? Why does he frighten you so, this silly little man?”

“He is going to kill me. It was foreseen when I was ten. I wanted to know who I would marry, but she said...”

“She?”

“The *maegi*.” The words came tumbling out of her. She could still hear Melara Hetherspoon insisting that if they never spoke about the prophecies, they would not come true. *She was not so silent in the well, though. She screamed and shouted.* “Tyrion is the *valonqar*,” she said. “Do you use that word in Myr? It’s High Valyrian, it means *little brother*.” She had asked Septa Saranella about the word, after Melara drowned.

Taena took her hand and stroked it. “This was a hateful woman, old and sick and ugly. You were young and beautiful, full of life and pride. She lived in Lannisport, you said, so she would have known of the dwarf and how he killed your lady mother. This creature dared not strike you, because of who you were, so she sought to wound you with her viper’s tongue.”

Could it be? Cersei wanted to believe it. “Melara died, though, just as she foretold. I never wed Prince Rhaegar. And Joffrey... the dwarf killed my son before my eyes.”

“One son,” said Lady Merryweather, “but you have another, sweet and strong, and no harm will ever come to *him*.”

“Never, whilst I live.” Saying it helped her believe that it was so. *Dreams turn to dust in light of day, yes.* Outside the morning sun was shining through a haze of cloud. Cersei slipped out from under the blankets. “I will break my fast with the king this morning. I want to see my son.” *All I do, I do for him.*

Tommen helped restore her to herself. He had never been more precious to her than he was that morning, chattering about his kittens as he dribbled honey onto a chunk of hot black bread fresh from the ovens. “Ser Pounce caught a mouse,” he told her, “but Lady Whiskers stole it from him.”

I was never so sweet and innocent, Cersei thought. *How can he ever hope to rule in this cruel realm?* The mother in her wanted only to protect him; the queen in her knew he must grow harder, or the Iron Throne was

certain to devour him. “Ser Pounce must learn to defend his rights,” she told him. “In this world the weak are always the victims of the strong.”

The king considered that, licking honey off his fingers. “When Ser Loras comes back I’m going to learn to fight with lance and sword and morningstar, the same way he does.”

“You will learn to fight,” the queen promised, “but not from Ser Loras. He will not be coming back, Tommen.”

“Margaery says he will. We pray for him. We ask for the Mother’s mercy, and for the Warrior to give him strength. Elinor says that this is Ser Loras’s hardest battle.”

She smoothed his hair back, the soft golden curls that reminded her so much of Joff. “Will you be spending the afternoon with your wife and her cousins?”

“Not today. She has to fast and purify herself, she said.”

Fast and purify... oh, for Maiden’s Day. It had been years since Cersei had been required to observe that particular holy day. *Thrice wed, yet she still would have us believe she is a maid.* Demure in white, the little queen would lead her hens to Baelor’s Sept to light tall white candles at the Maiden’s feet and hang parchment garlands about her holy neck. *A few of her hens, at least.* On Maiden’s Day widows, mothers, and whores alike were barred from the septs, along with men, lest they profane the sacred songs of innocence. Only virgin maids could...

“Mother? Did I say something wrong?”

Cersei kissed her son’s brow. “You said something very wise, sweetling. Now run along and play with your kittens.”

Afterward she summoned Ser Osney Kettleblack to her solar. He came in sweaty from the yard and swaggering, and as he took a knee he undressed her with his eyes, the way he always did.

“Rise, ser, and sit here next to me. You did me a valiant service once, but now I have a harder task for you.”

“Aye, and I have something hard for you.”

“That must wait.” She traced his scars lightly with the tips of her fingers. “Do you recall the whore who gave these to you? I’ll give her to you when you come back from the Wall. Would you like that?”

“It’s you I want.”

That was the right answer. “First you must confess your treason. A man’s sins can poison his soul if left to fester. I know it must be hard for you to live with what you’ve done. It is past time that you rid yourself of your shame.”

“Shame?” Osney sounded baffled. “I told Osmund, Margaery just teases. She never lets me do any more than...”

“It is chivalrous of you to protect her,” Cersei broke in, “but you are too good a knight to go on living with your crime. No, you must take yourself to the Great Sept of Baelor this very night and speak with the High Septon. When a man’s sins are so black, only His High Holiness himself can save him from hell’s torments. Tell him how you bedded Margaery and her cousins.”

Osney blinked. “What, the cousins too?”

“Megga and Elinor,” she decided, “never Alla.” That little detail would make the whole story more plausible. “Alla would sit weeping, and plead with the others to stop their sinning.”

“Just Megga and Elinor? Or Margaery too?”

“Margaery, most certainly. She was the one behind it all.”

She told him all she had in mind. As Osney listened, apprehension slowly spread across his face. When she finished he said, “After you cut her head off, I want to take that kiss she never gave me.”

“You may take all the kisses you like.”

“And then the Wall?”

“For just a little while. Tommen is a forgiving king.”

Osney scratched at his scarred cheek. “Usually if I lie about some woman, it’s me saying how I never fucked them and them saying how I did.

This... I never lied to no *High Septon* before. I think you go to some hell for that. One o' the bad ones."

The queen was taken aback. The last thing she expected was piety from a Kettleblack. "Are you refusing to obey me?"

"No." Osney touched her golden hair. "The thing is, the best lies have some truth in 'em... to give 'em flavor, as it were. And you want me to go tell how I fucked a queen..."

She almost slapped his face. Almost. But she had gone too far, and too much was at stake. *All I do, I do for Tommen*. She turned her head and caught Ser Osney's hand with her own, kissing his fingers. They were rough and hard, callused from the sword. *Robert had hands like that*, she thought.

Cersei wrapped her arms about his neck. "I would not want it said I made a liar of you," she whispered in a husky voice. "Give me an hour, and meet me in my bedchamber."

"We waited long enough." He thrust his fingers inside the bodice of her gown and yanked, and the silk parted with a ripping sound so loud that Cersei was afraid that half of the Red Keep must have heard it. "Take off the rest before I tear that too," he said. "You can keep the crown on. I like you in the crown."